Political supply on TikTok

An attention Oligopoly

Benjamin Guinaudeau (ULaval), Kylan Rutherford, Solomon Messing, and Joshua Tucker (CSMaP@NYU)

Nov. 19 2025

Objectives: Description of political TikTok

1. ‘Recent’ shift of social phenomena (TikTokification of Social media)
2. Before we can credibly explain the ‘why’, we need to understand the ‘what’

Putting the ‘why’ before the ‘what’ (V1)

Forbes

Subscribe: Less than $1.50/wk

Sign In

TikTok Is A Beacon Of Democracy In The Social Media Landscape

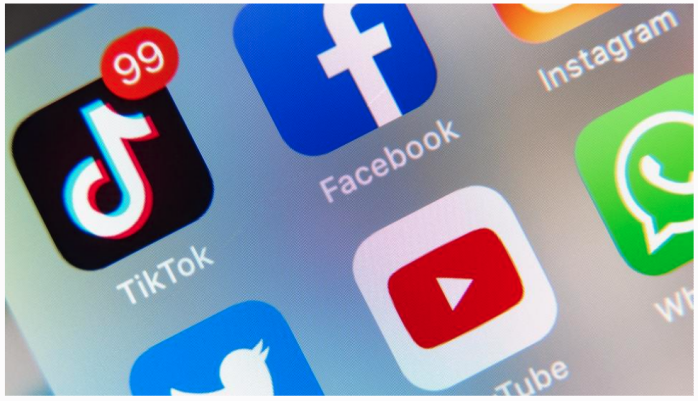
By James Broughel, Contributor. James Broughel is an economist focused...

Follow Author

Published Apr 19, 2024, 10:06am EDT, Updated Apr 19, 2024, 01:22pm EDT

Share Save Comment 0

ADVERTISEMENT



The proposed TikTok ban in Congress fail's to recognize how the app's algorithm is more democratic and open and those of its competitors.

GETTY

Putting the ‘why’ before the ‘what’ (V2)

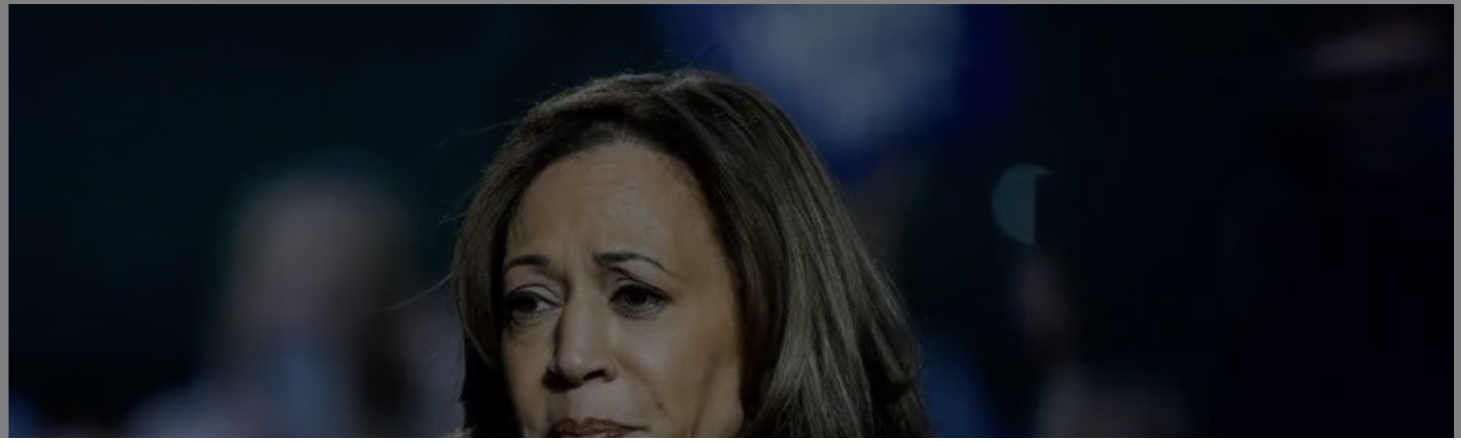
POLITICS

This is why Kamala Harris really lost

TikTok is making young voters more Republican?

by **Eric Levitz**

Updated Mar 18, 2025, 11:59 AM EDT



Putting the ‘why’ before the ‘what’ (V3)

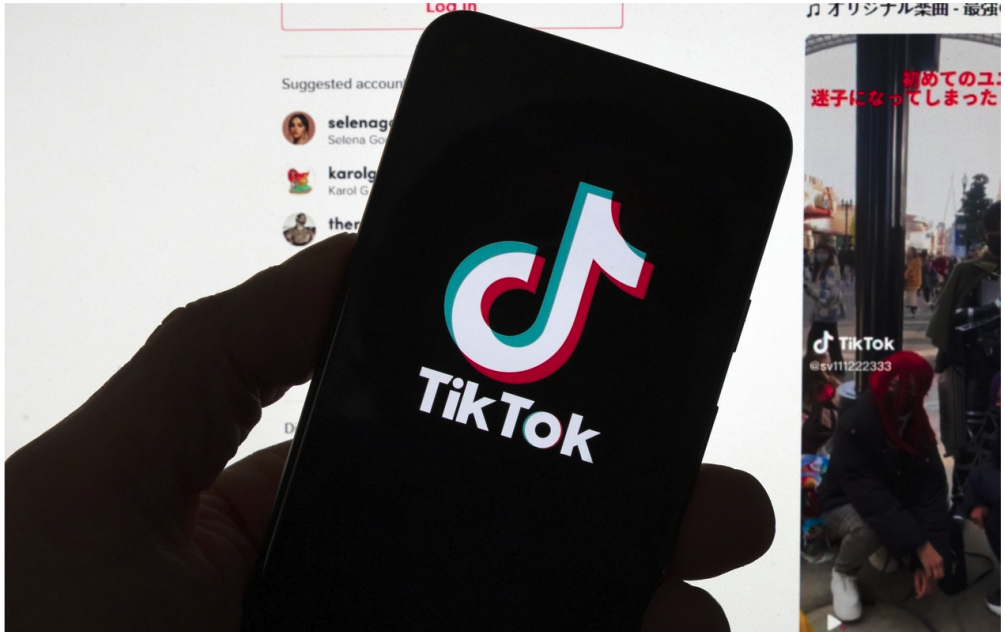
POLITICO

Defense | National Security Daily | Global Security newsletter

TECHNOLOGY

The Chinese government is using TikTok to meddle in elections, ODNI says

The annual assessment from ODNI outlines national security threats facing the U.S.



Objectives: Description of political TikTok

Objectives: Description of political TikTok

1. How much political content is produced and consume?
2. What does the ideological divide look like?
3. How concentrated is the attention?

What is Tiktok?

Main affordances

- Mobile-first
- Short video clips
- Recommender system

What is Tiktok?

Main affordances

- Mobile-first
- Short video clips
- Recommender system

$\rightarrow$ Dialectic between short-format and the recommender systems

- Lower costs of production
- More attention to distribute
- More behavioral data

Why does TikTok matter?

- High-penetration of TikTok (among Youth) (50% of < 30 follow news/politics on the app)
- Ambiguity of the algorithm makes it an easy political weapon (lots of theories, limited facts)
- Pioneering platform

How to do descriptive inference on TikTok?

1. Data donation: small convenience sample

How to do descriptive inference on TikTok?

1. Data donation: small convenience sample
2. Account-based sampling: expensive and/or unrepresentative

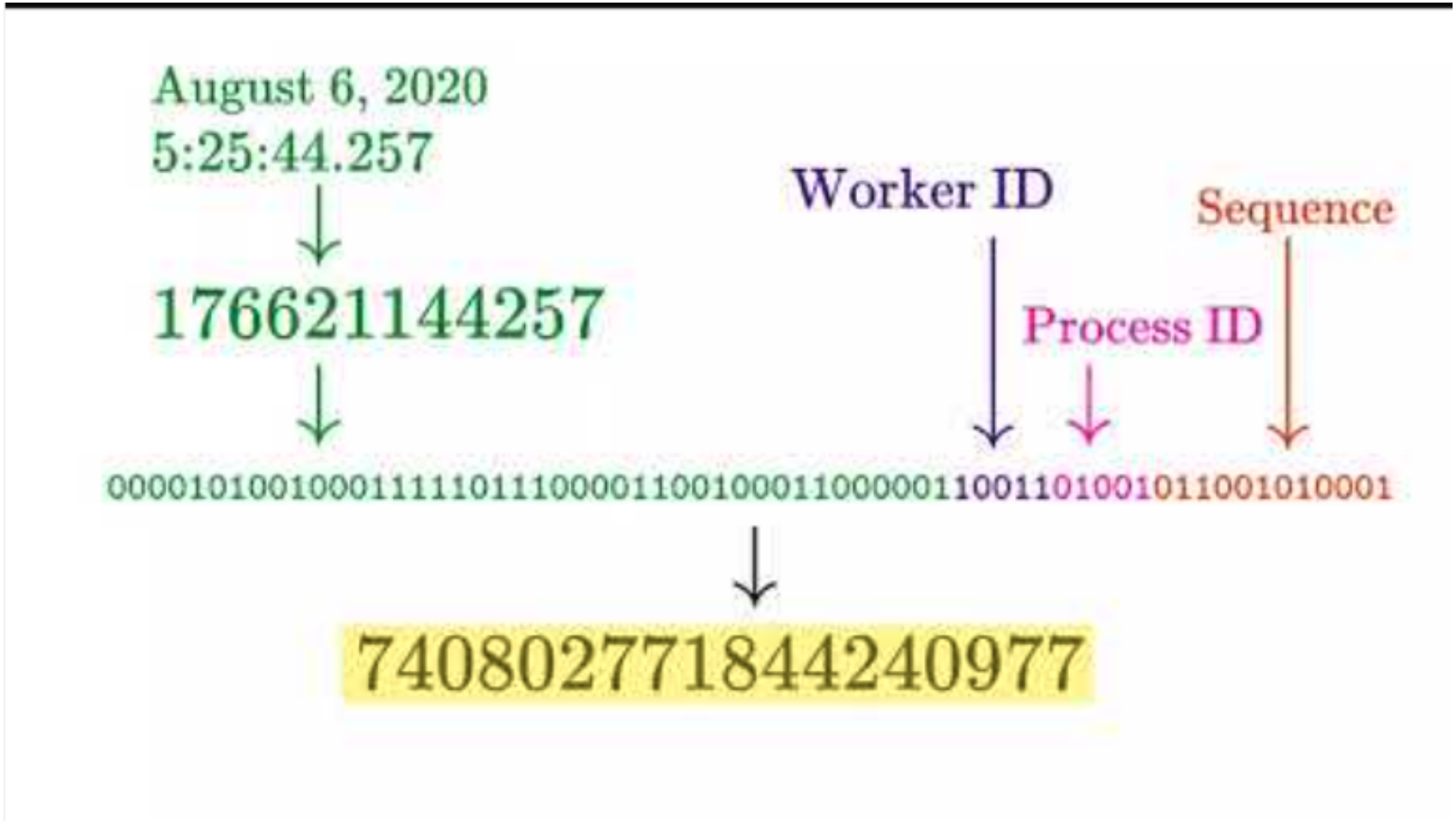
How to do descriptive inference on TikTok?

1. Data donation: small convenience sample
2. Account-based sampling: expensive and/or unrepresentative
3. TikTok search engine: (biased) recommended results

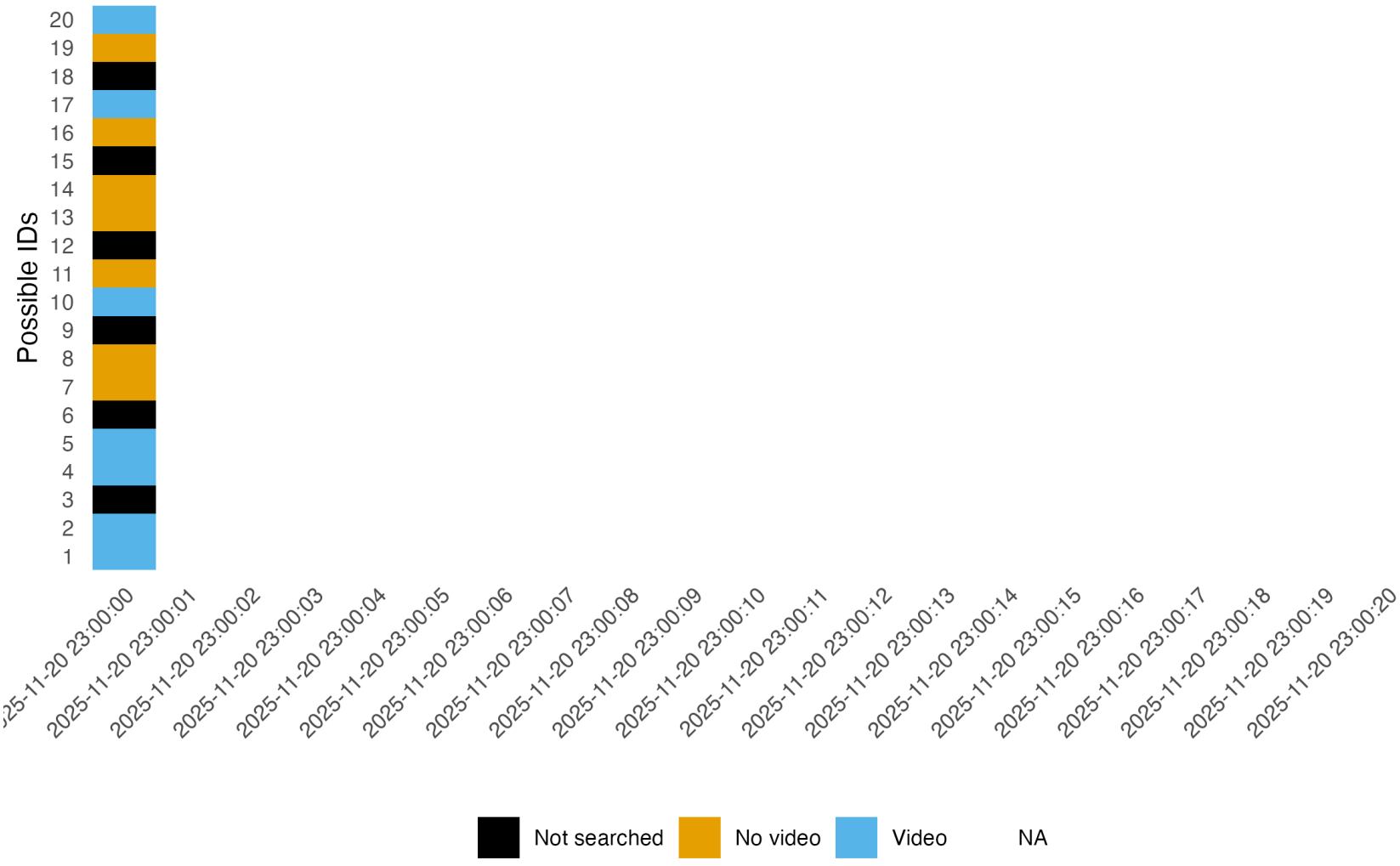
How to do descriptive inference on TikTok?

1. Data donation: small convenience sample
2. Account-based sampling: expensive and/or unrepresentative
3. TikTok search engine: (biased) recommended results
4. Research API: limited scope, low quality result (Darius, 2024)

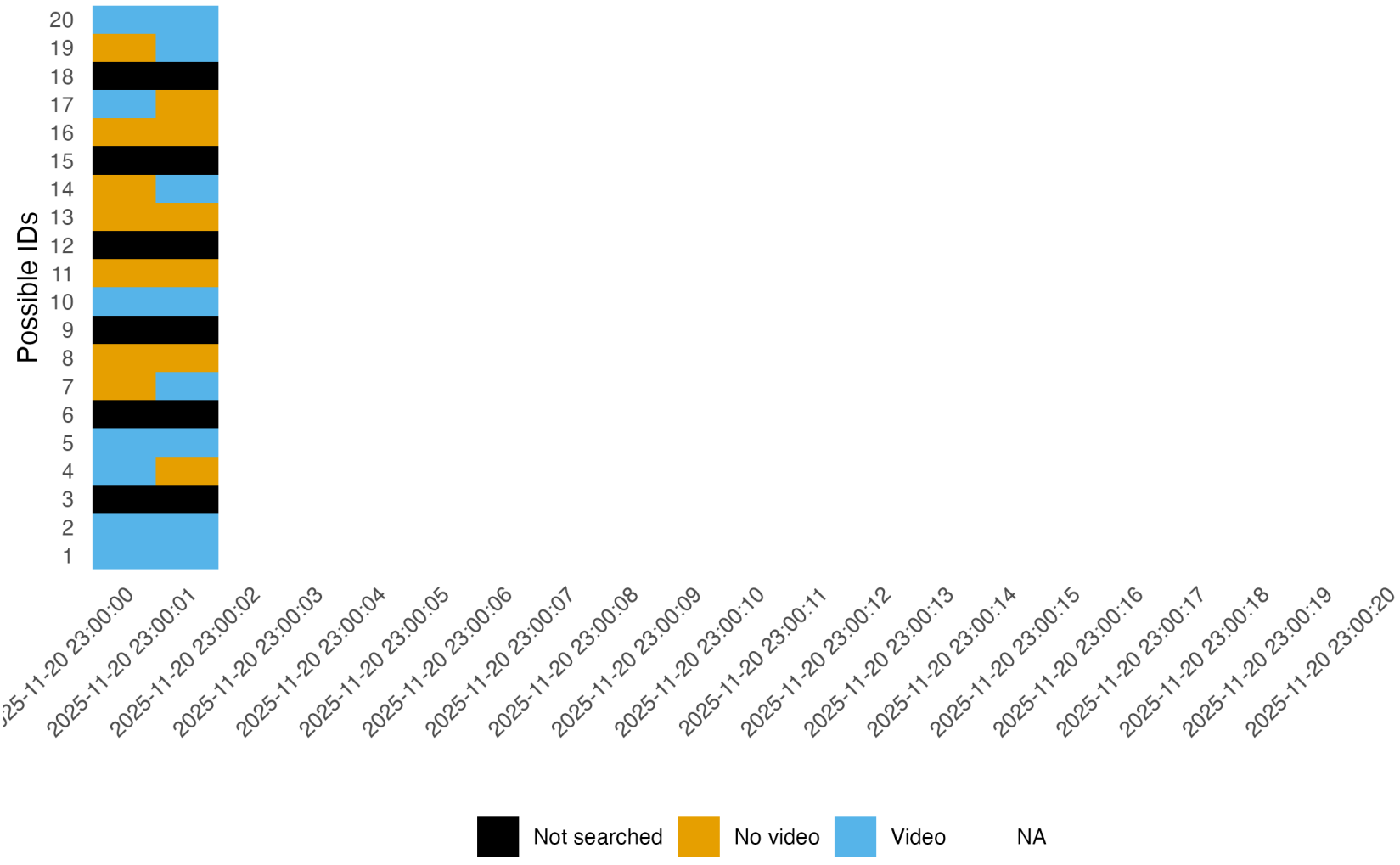
Our solution: enumerating TikTok IDs (Steel et al. 2025)



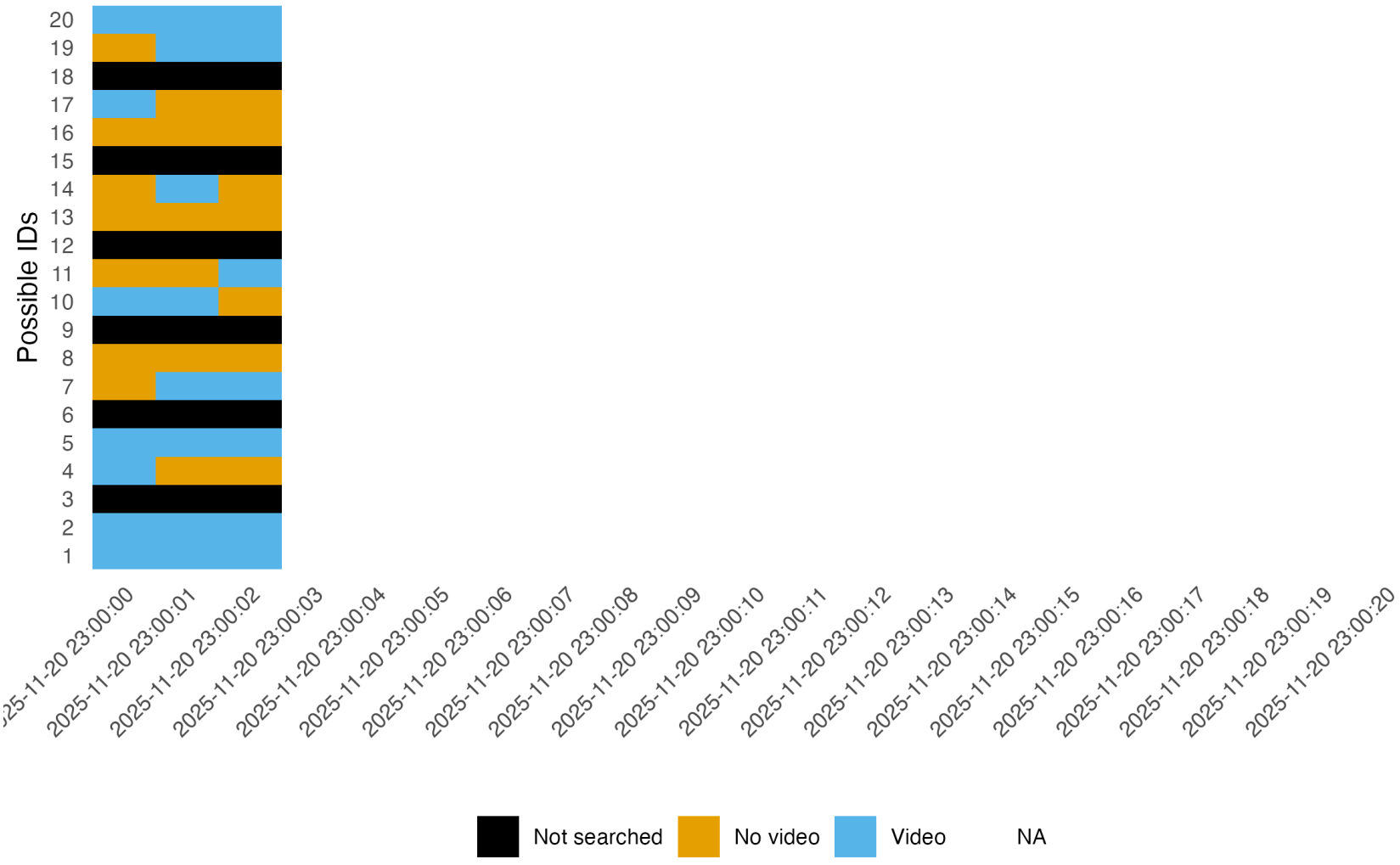
How to enumerate TikTok?



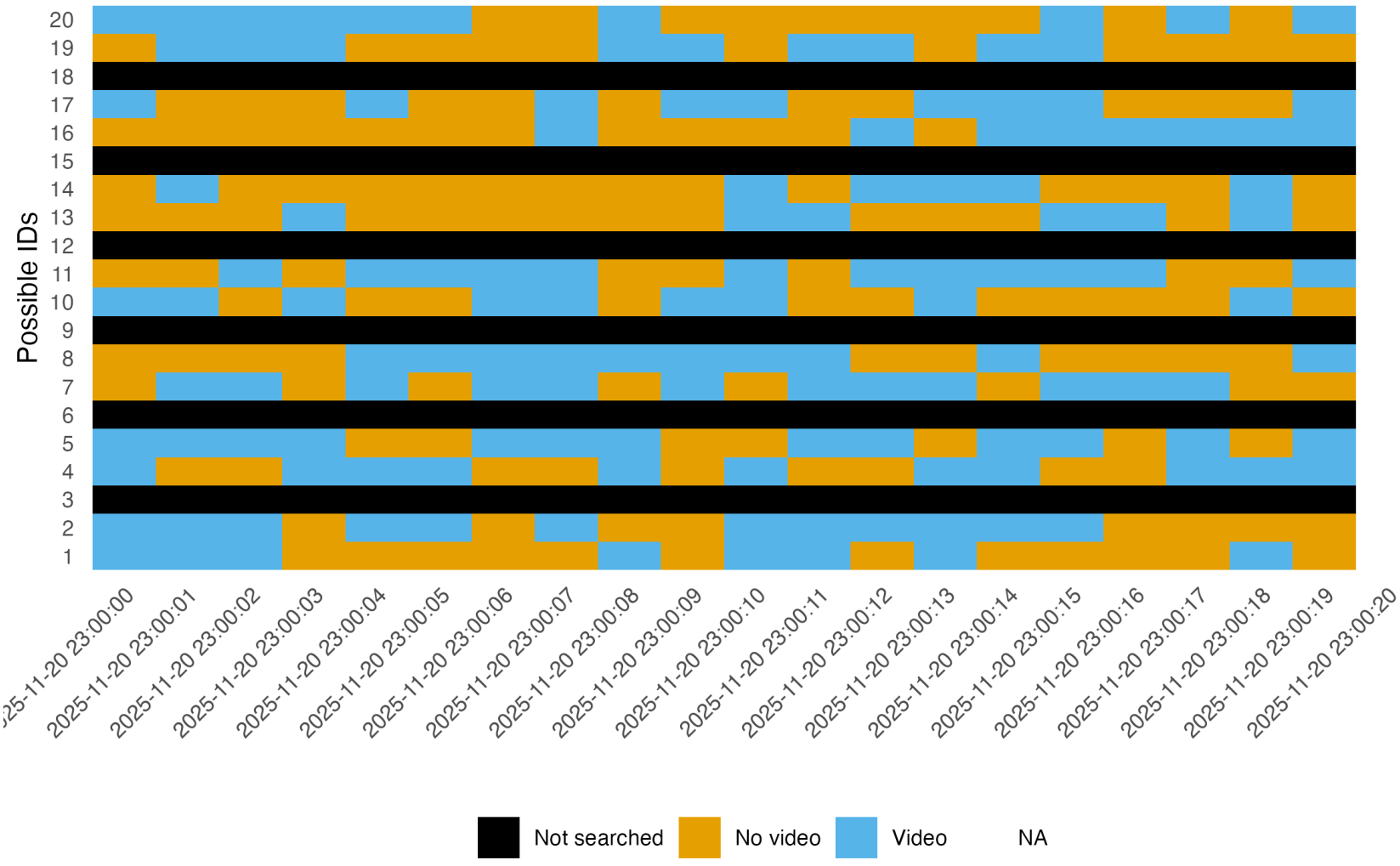
How to enumerate TikTok?



How to enumerate TikTok?



How to enumerate TikTok?



How to enumerate TikTok?

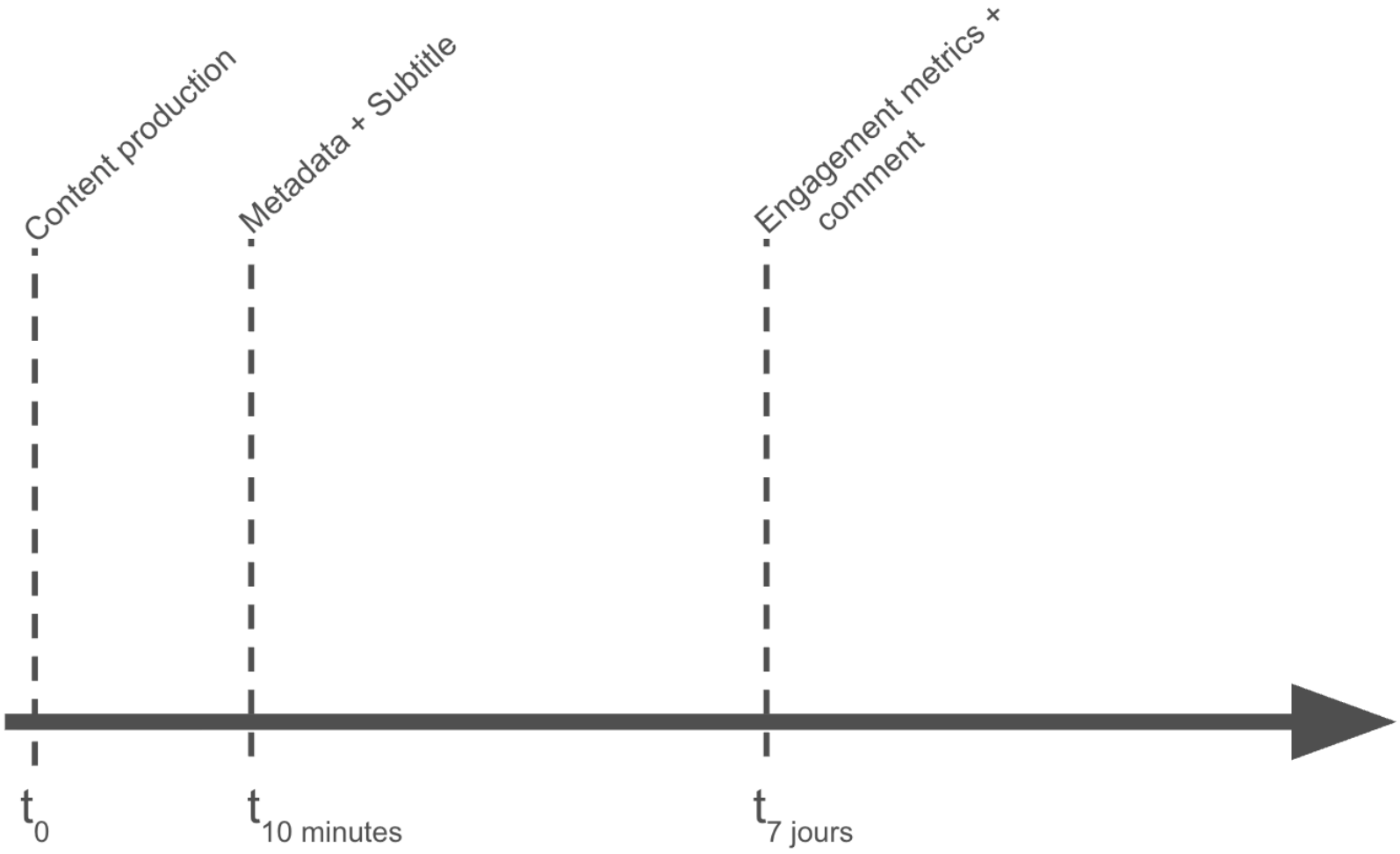
- Theoretically: 4.3 B IDs/second
- In reality: search space reduced to 400k possible IDs

How to enumerate TikTok?

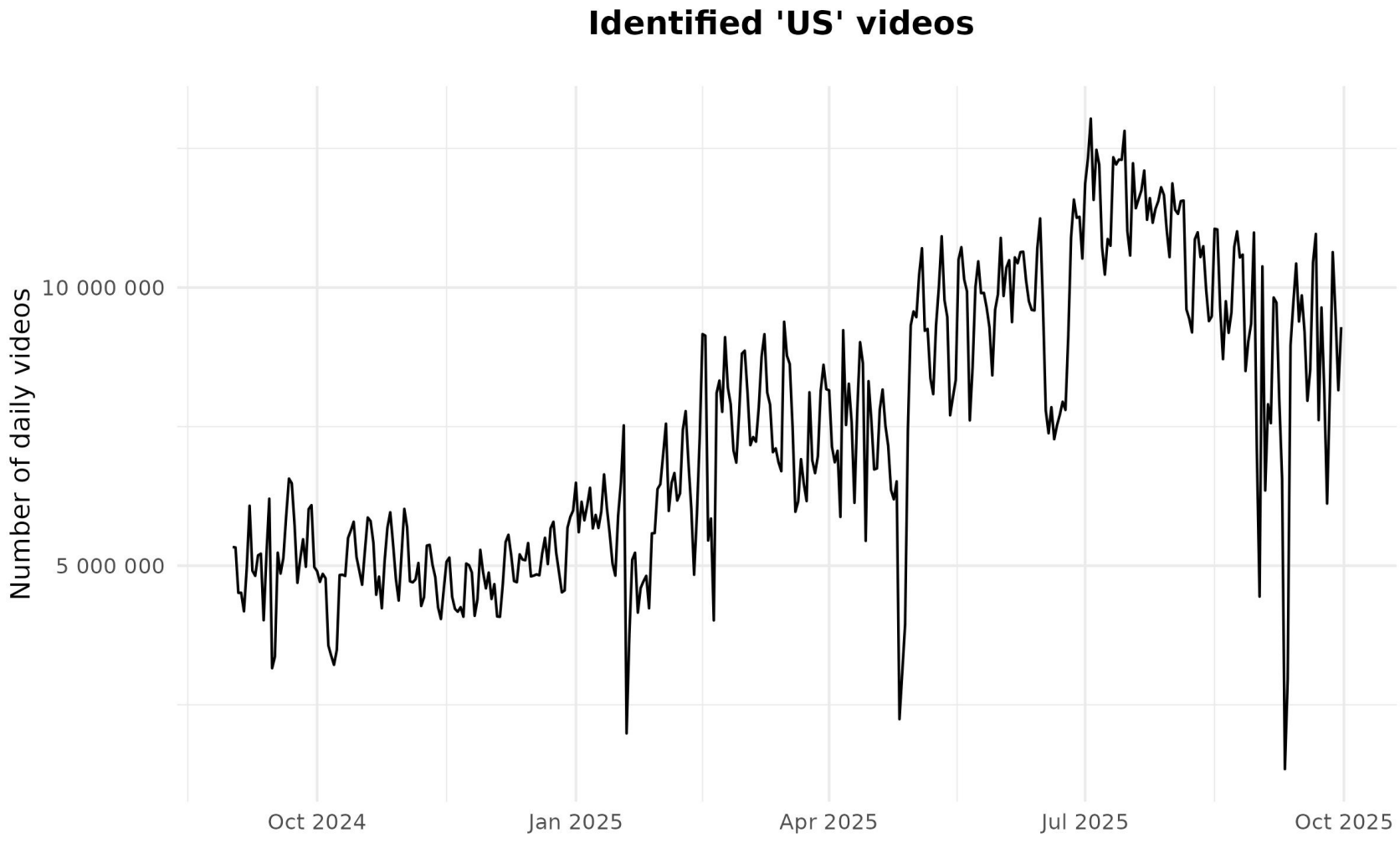
- Theoretically: 4.3 B IDs/second
- In reality: search space reduced to 400k possible IDs

$\rightarrow$ We try them all!

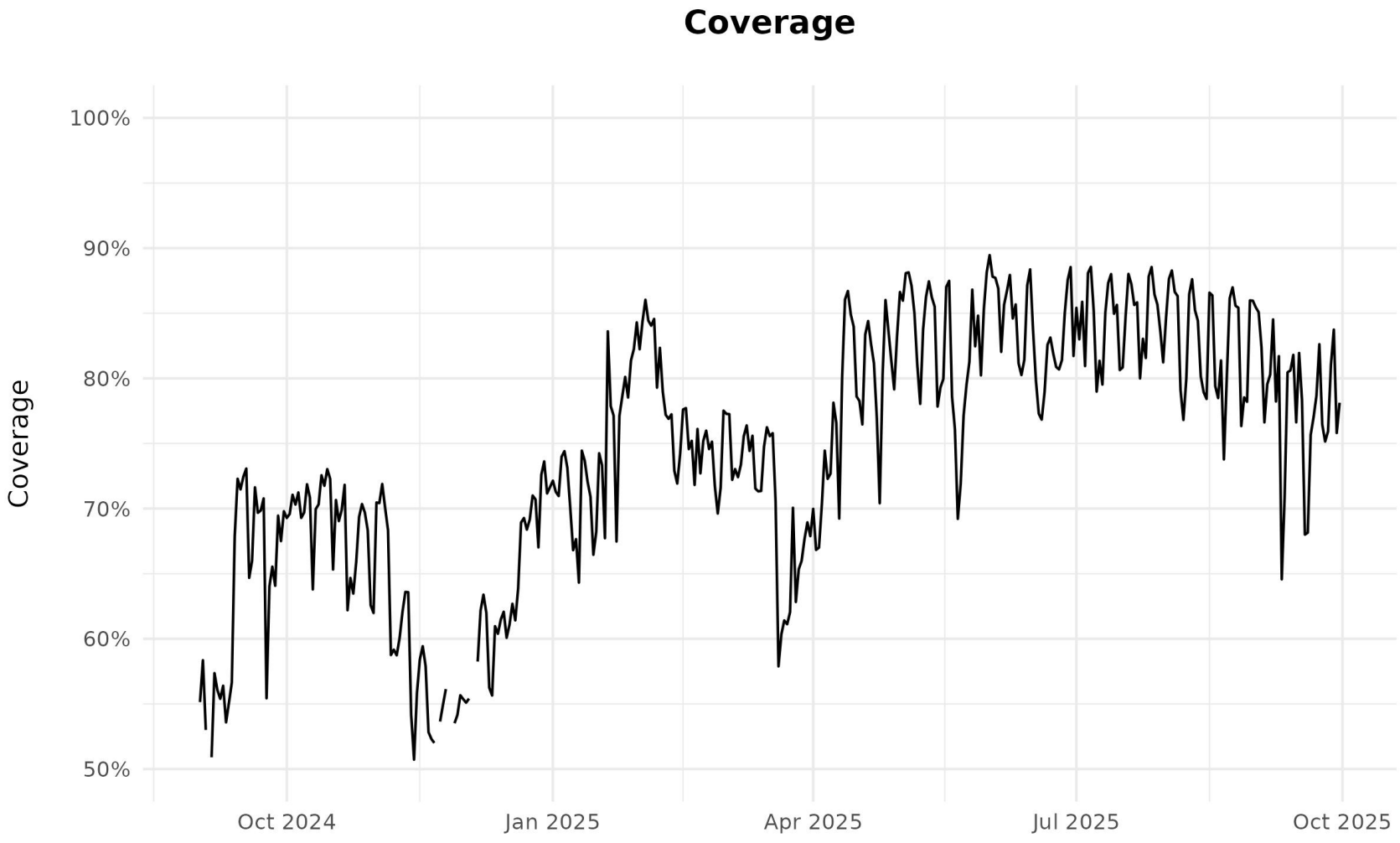
Overview of collection infrastructure



Oct. 2024 until Oct. 2025: 3.6B US posts



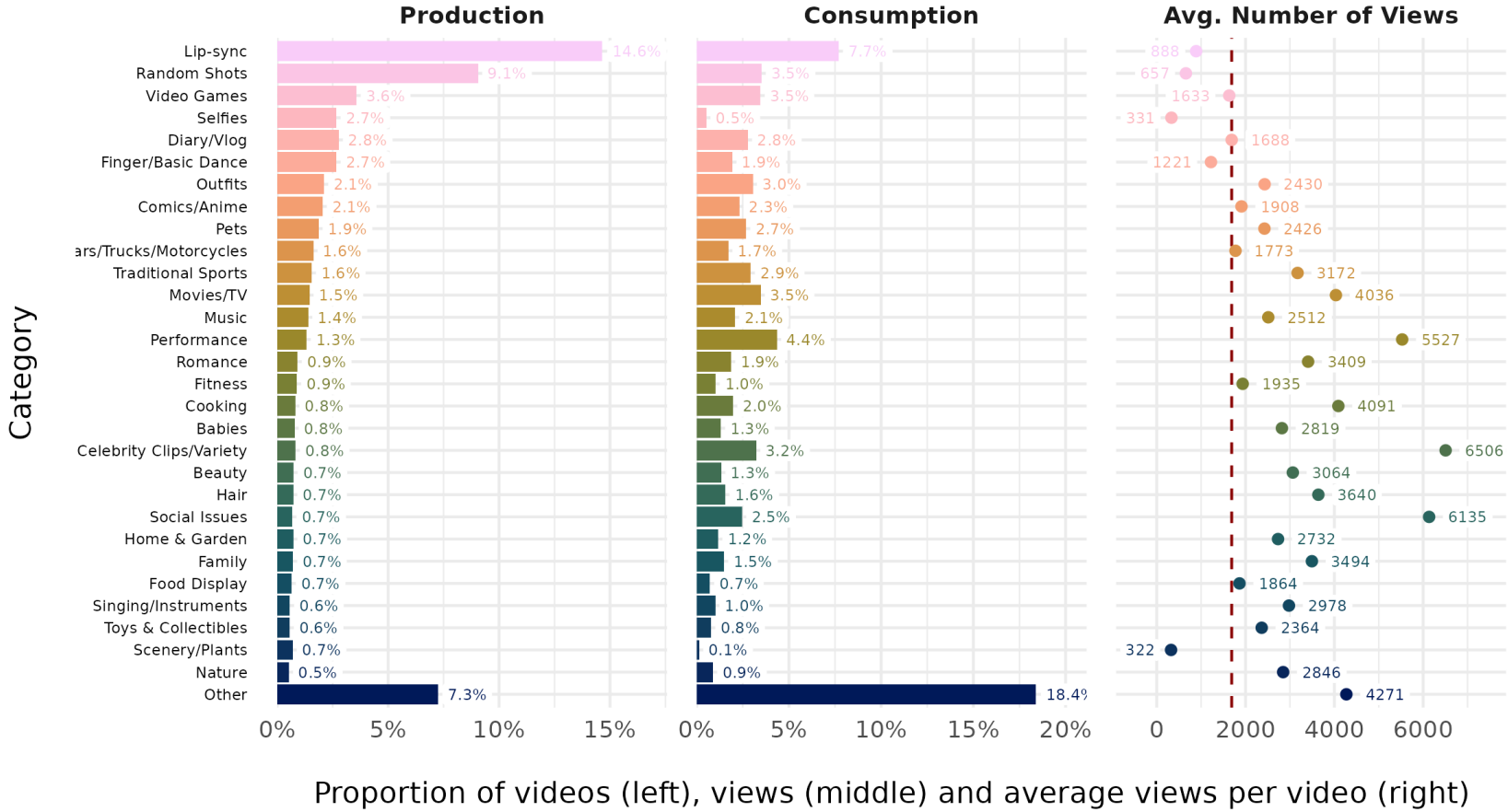
Random coverage stabilizing around 85%



What to do with so much data?

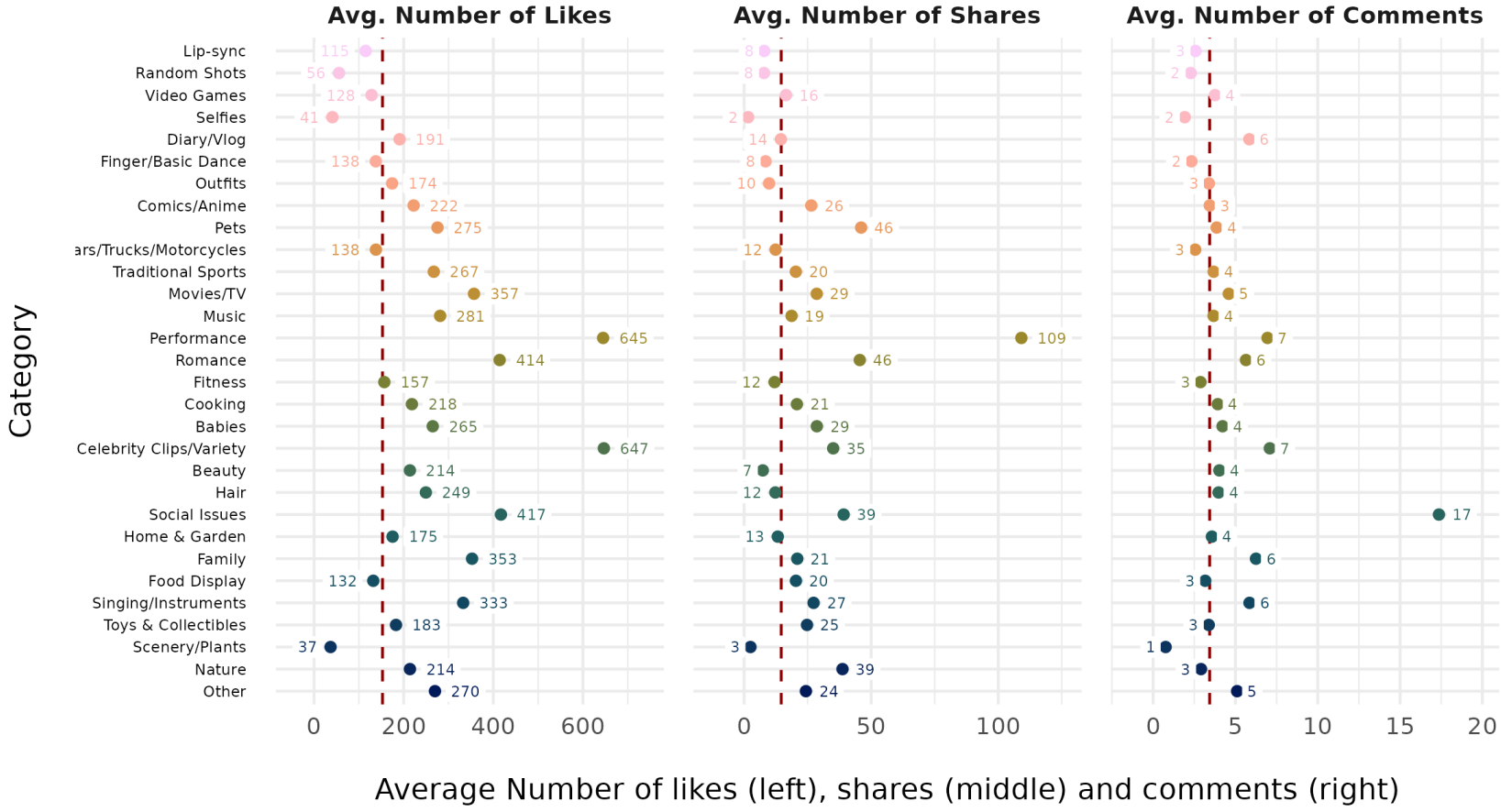
Let’s start with identifying political content!

TikTok Labels



Proportion of videos (left), views (middle) and average views per video (right)

TikTok Labels

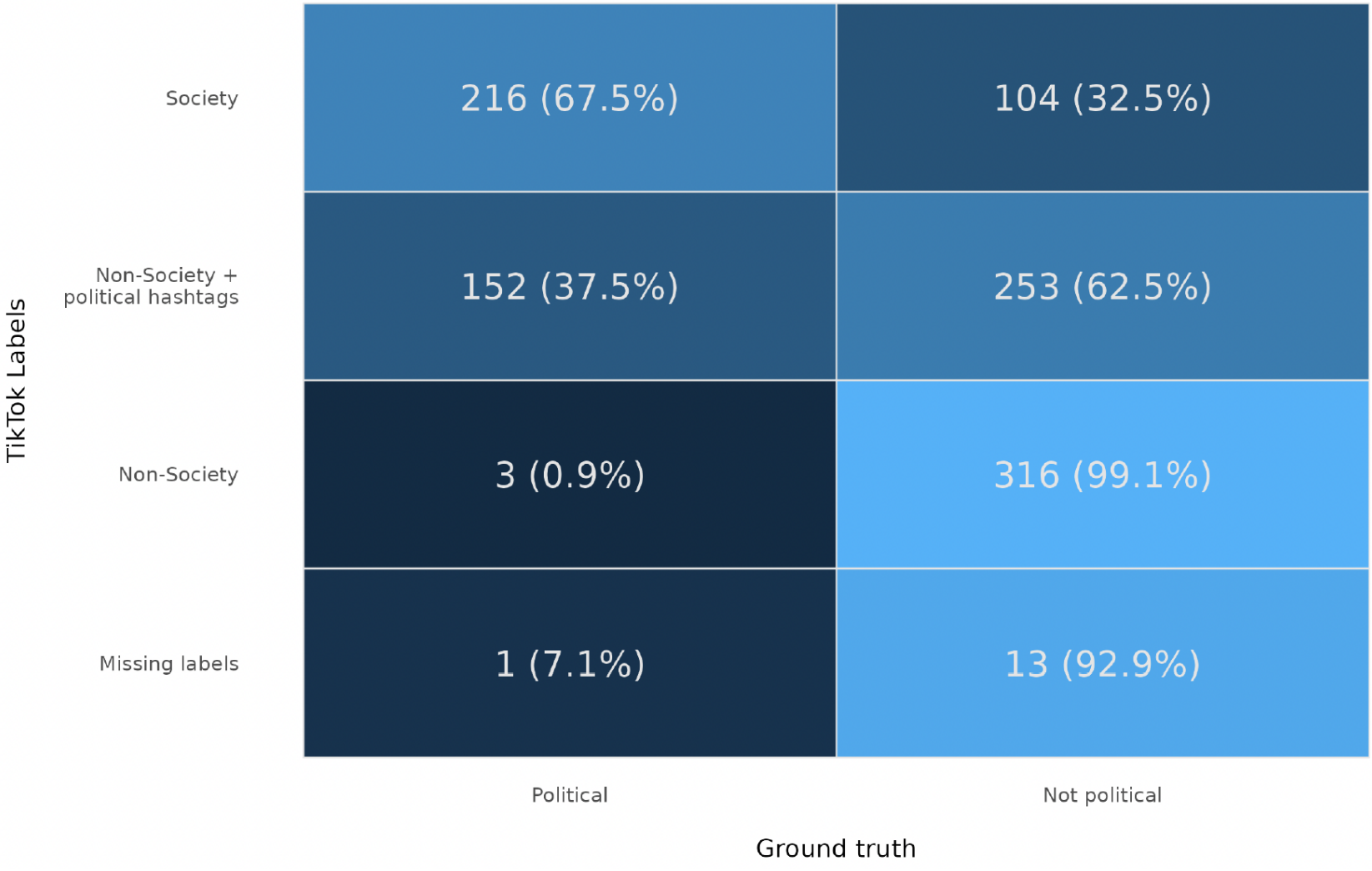


Identifying political content

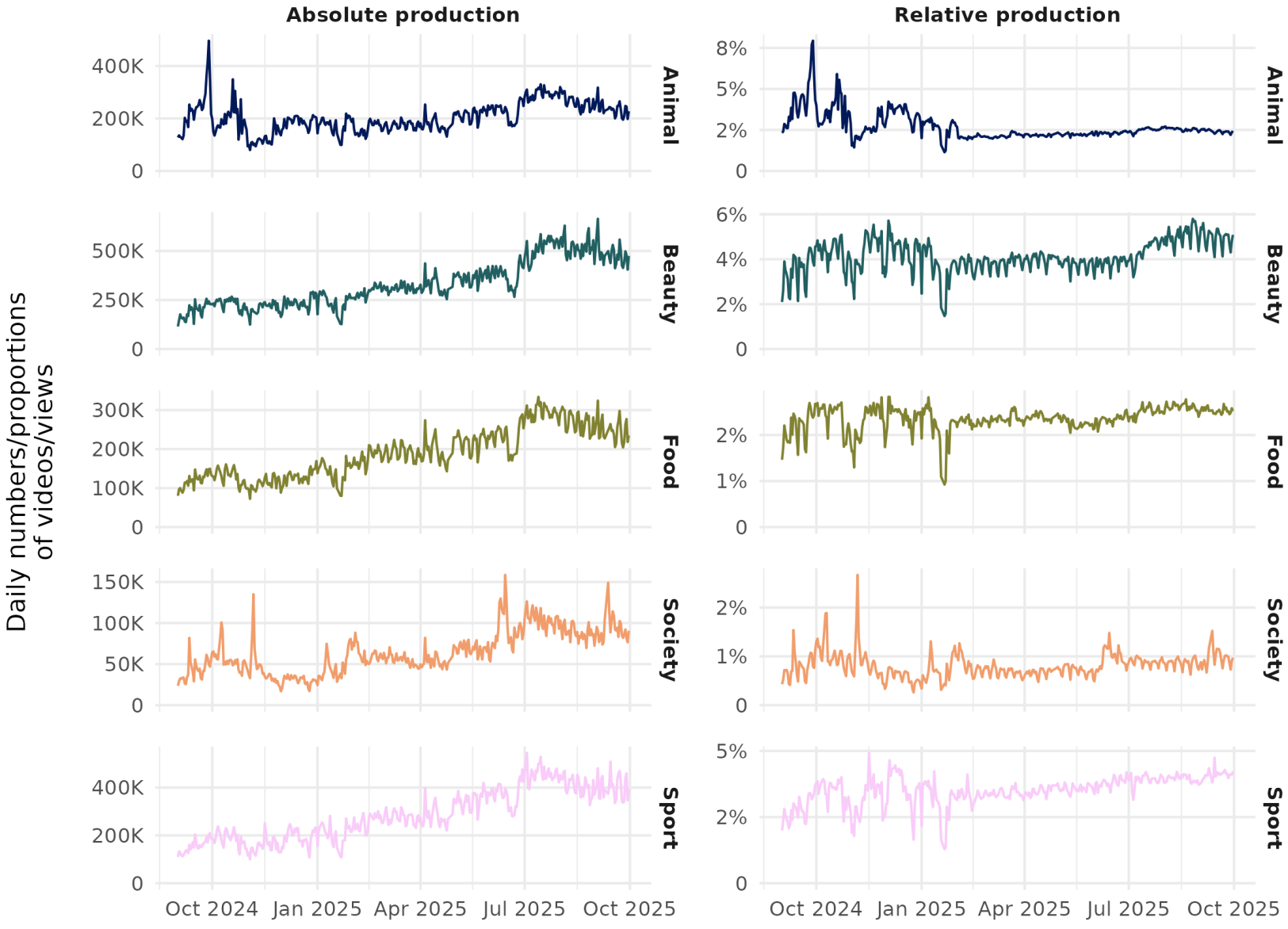
Society labels

- Environmental Protections (code 10022)
- Social News (code 10024)
- Street Interviews & Social Experiments (code 10081)
- Social Issues (code 10087)

Society label is not perfect but good enough signal

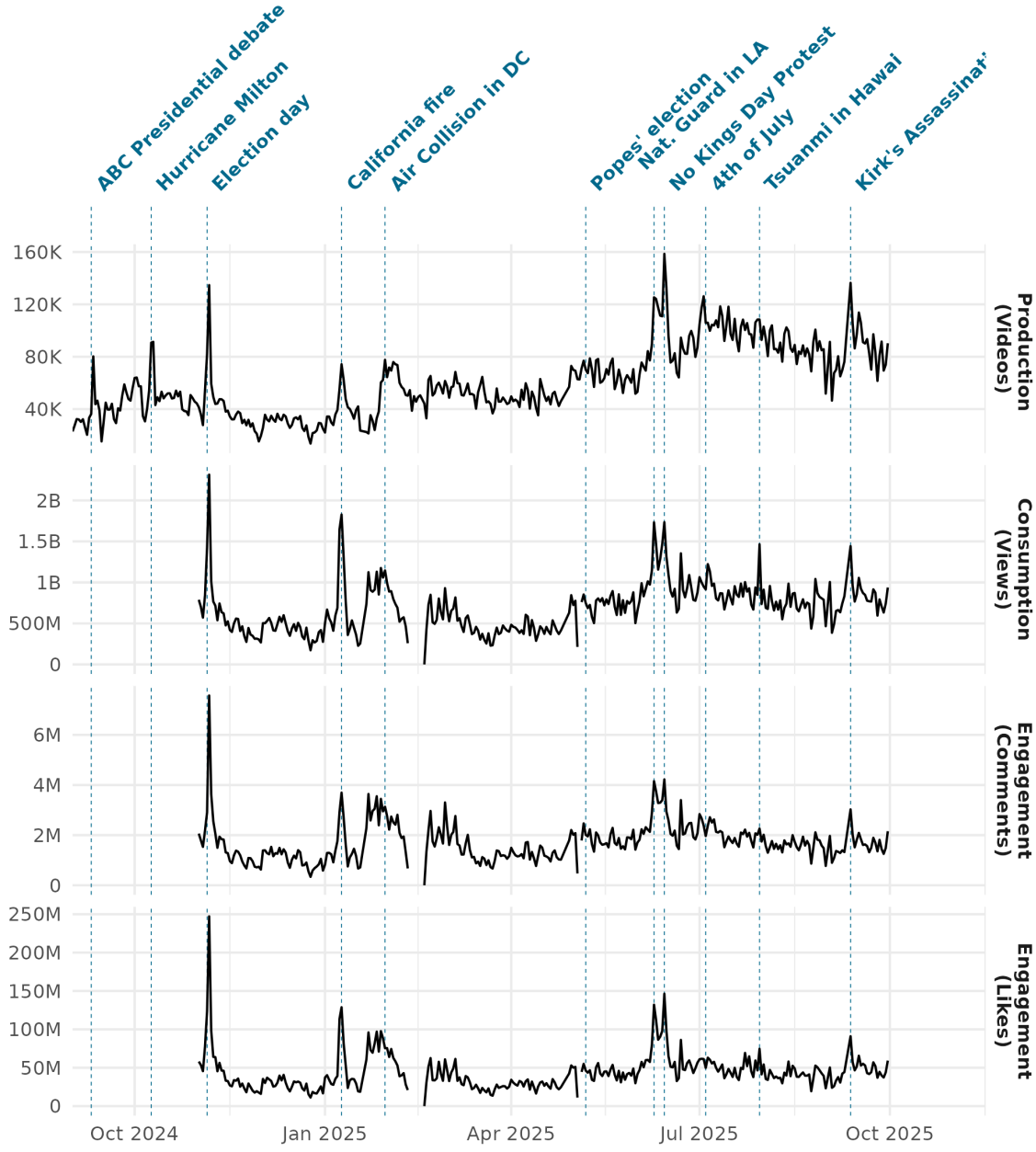


Production over time



Consumption over time

Politics is driven by events



Ok, but what about POLARIZATION?!

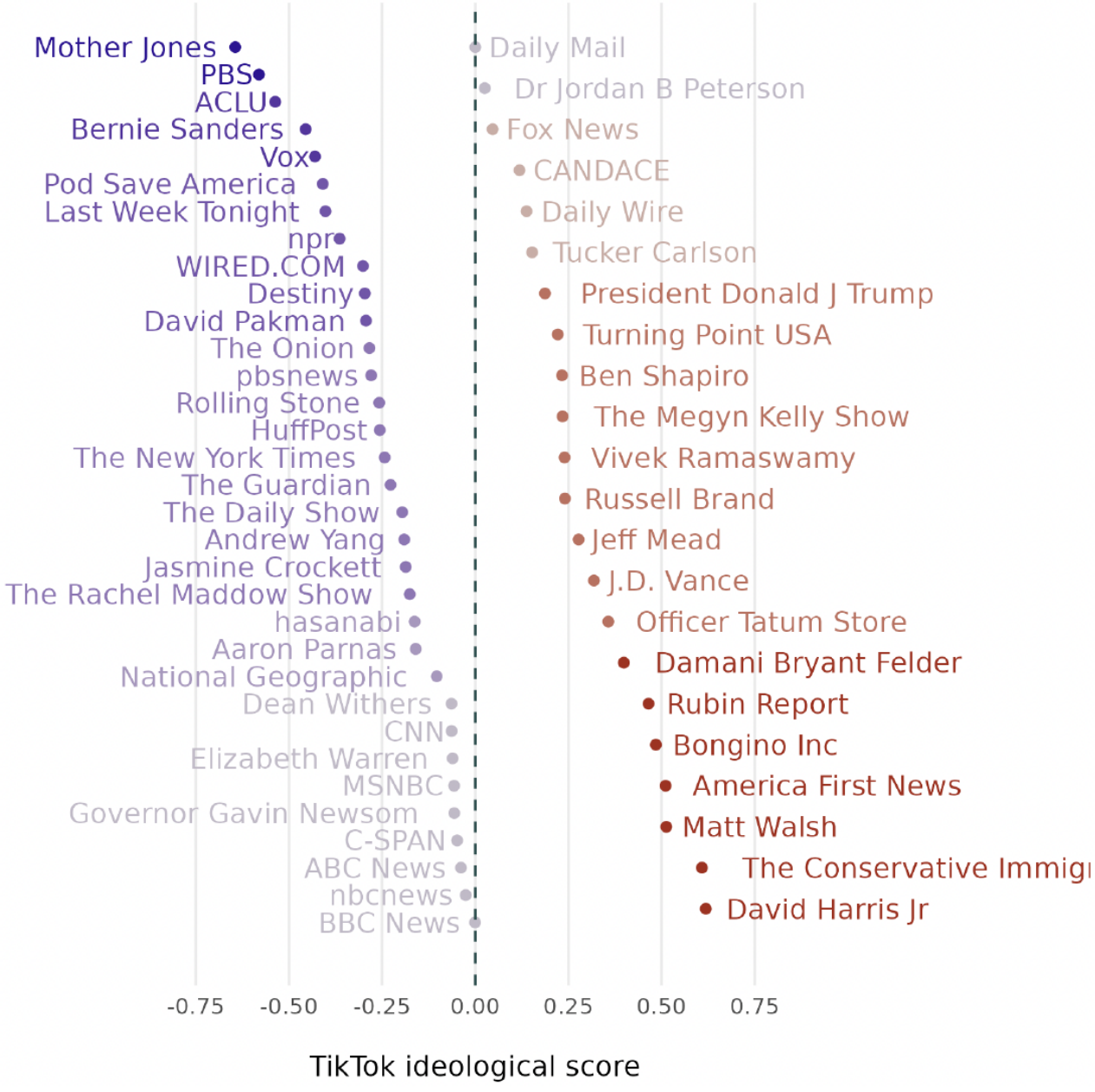
- Unfortunately, no TikTok label providing ideological leaning

How to measure ideology on TikTok? (Piqueras et al., 2025)

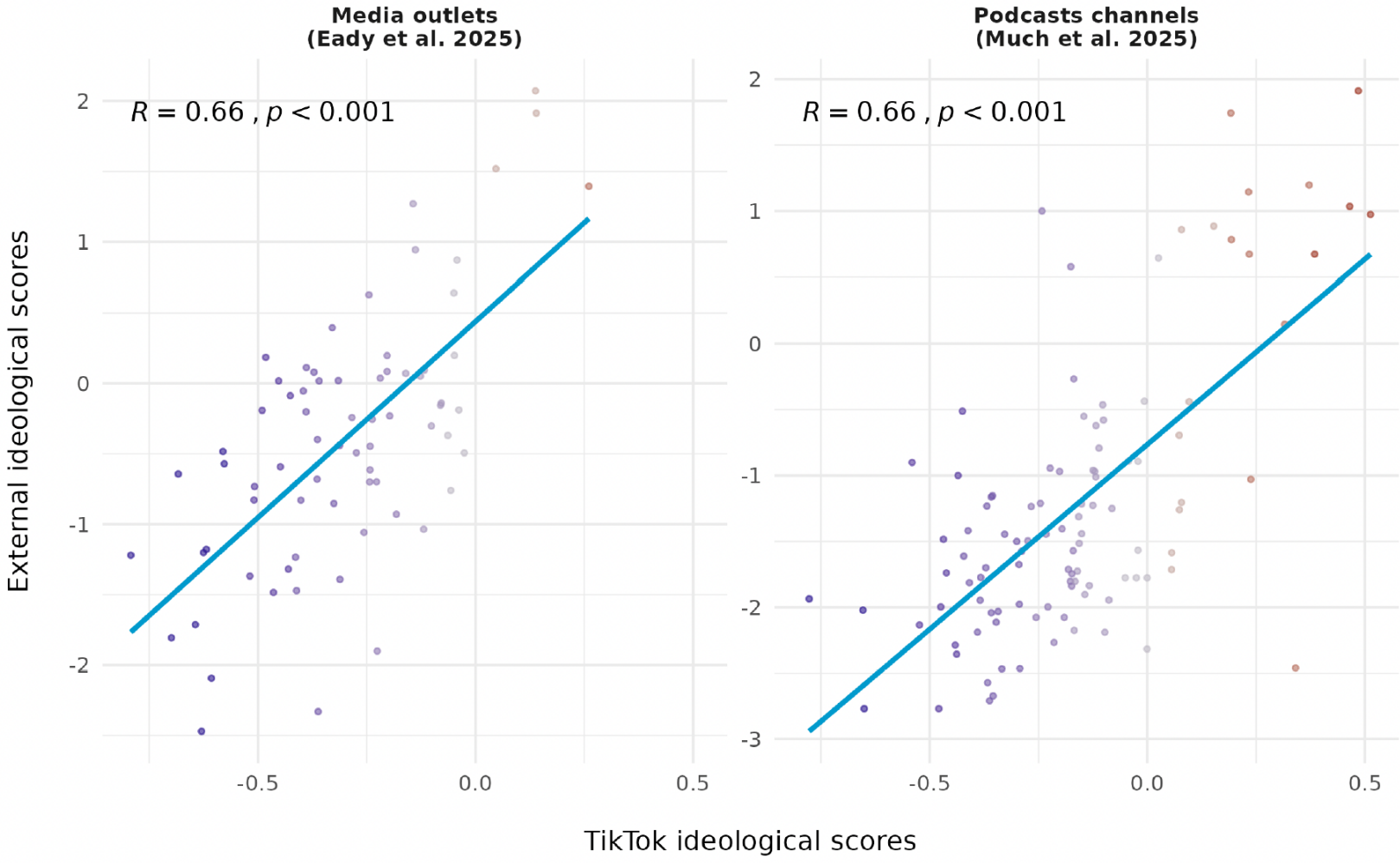
- Place commenters and videos on the same left–right axis.
- Closer ideologies $\Rightarrow$ more comments.

$$\lambda_{uv} \sim \text{Poisson}(\,-|\theta_u - \theta_v|),$$

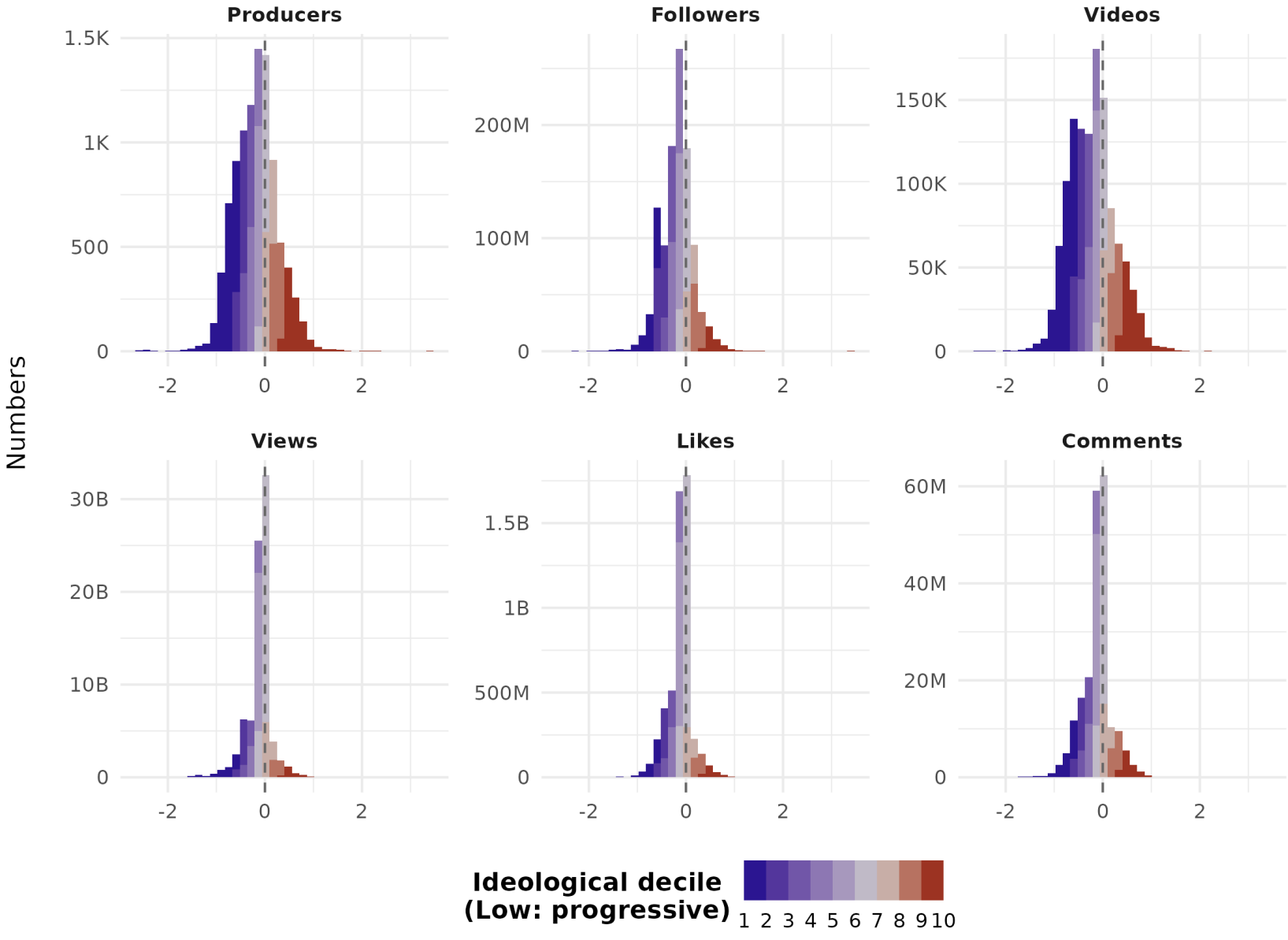
Face validity



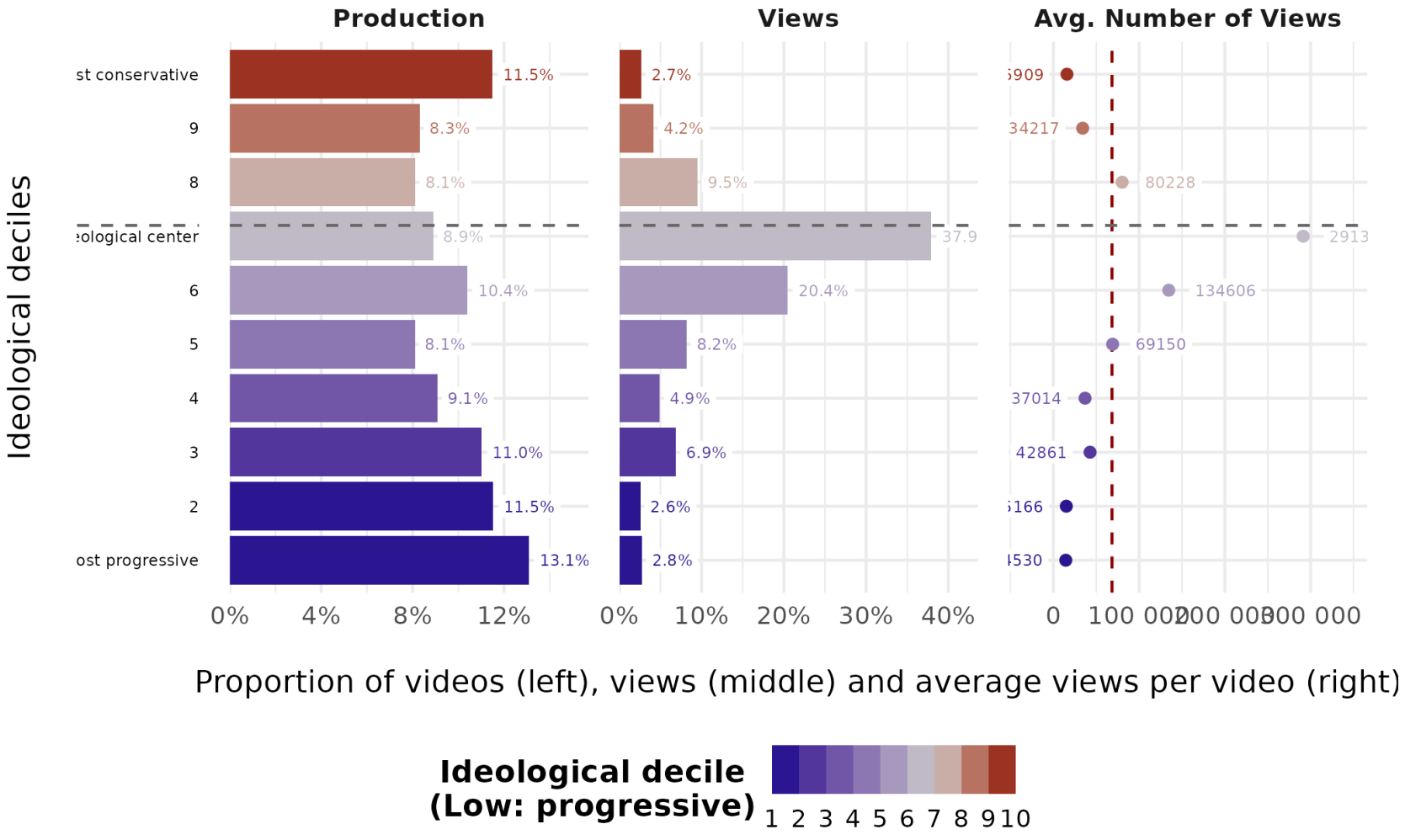
Convergent validity



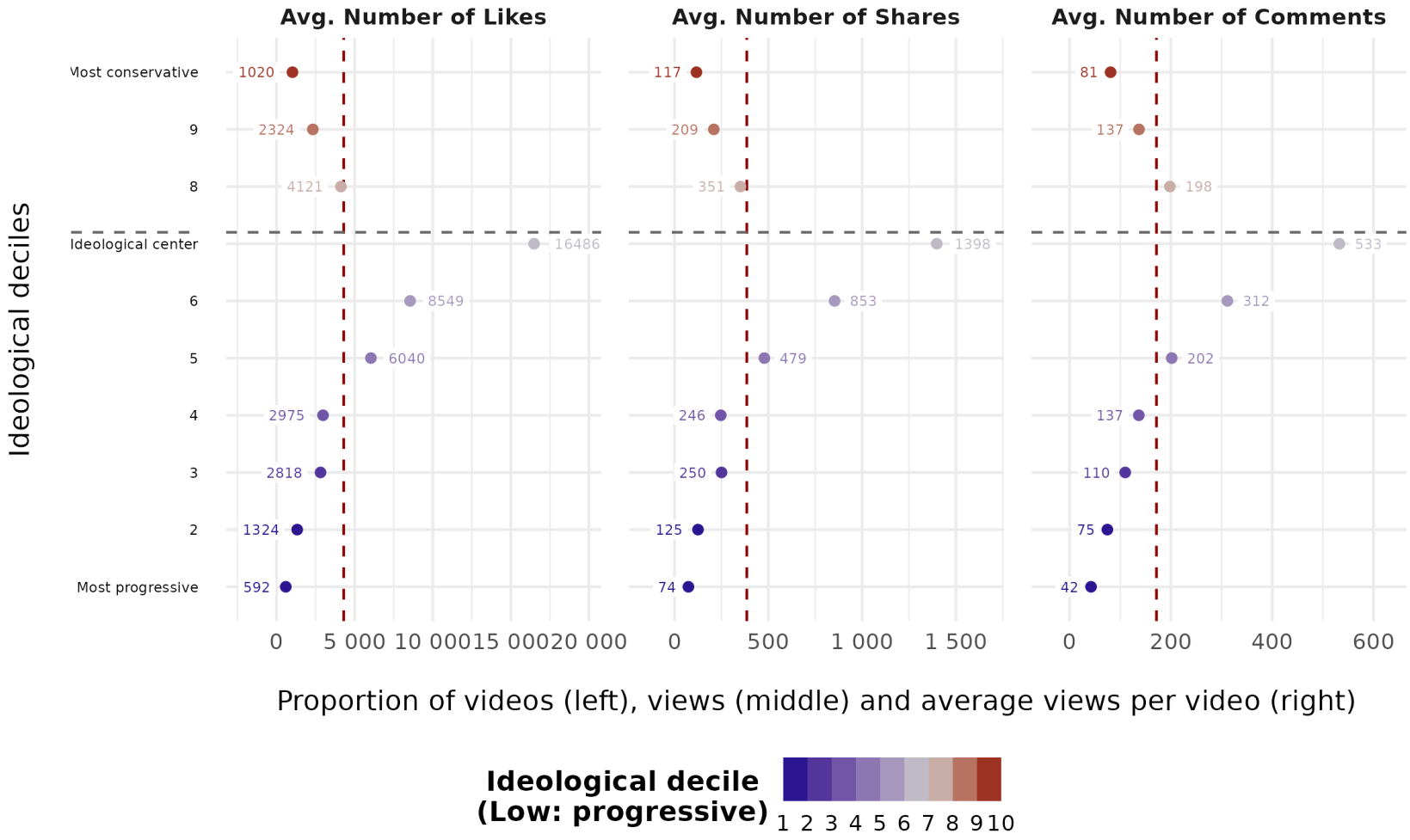
Moderate content get consumed



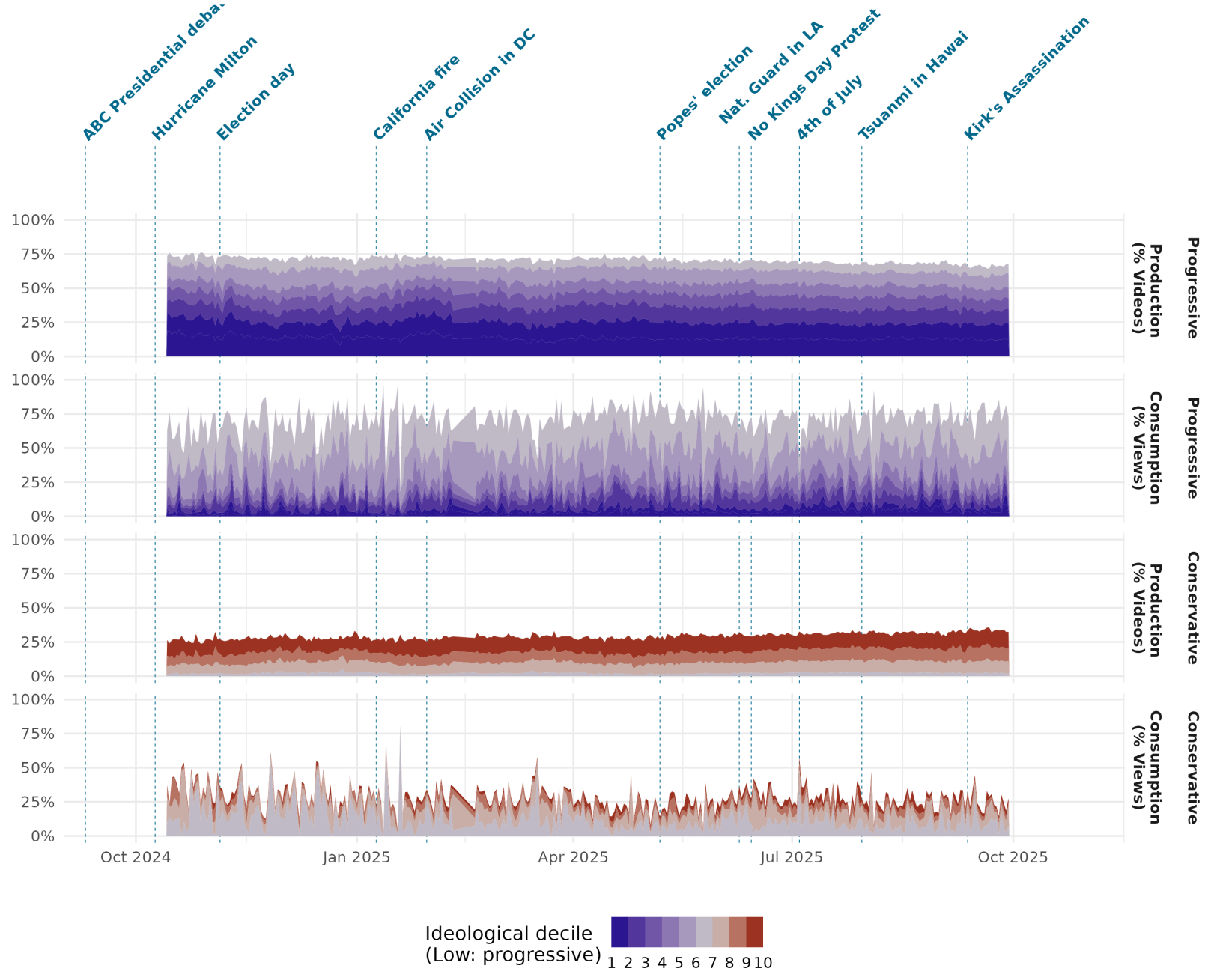
Moderate content get consumed



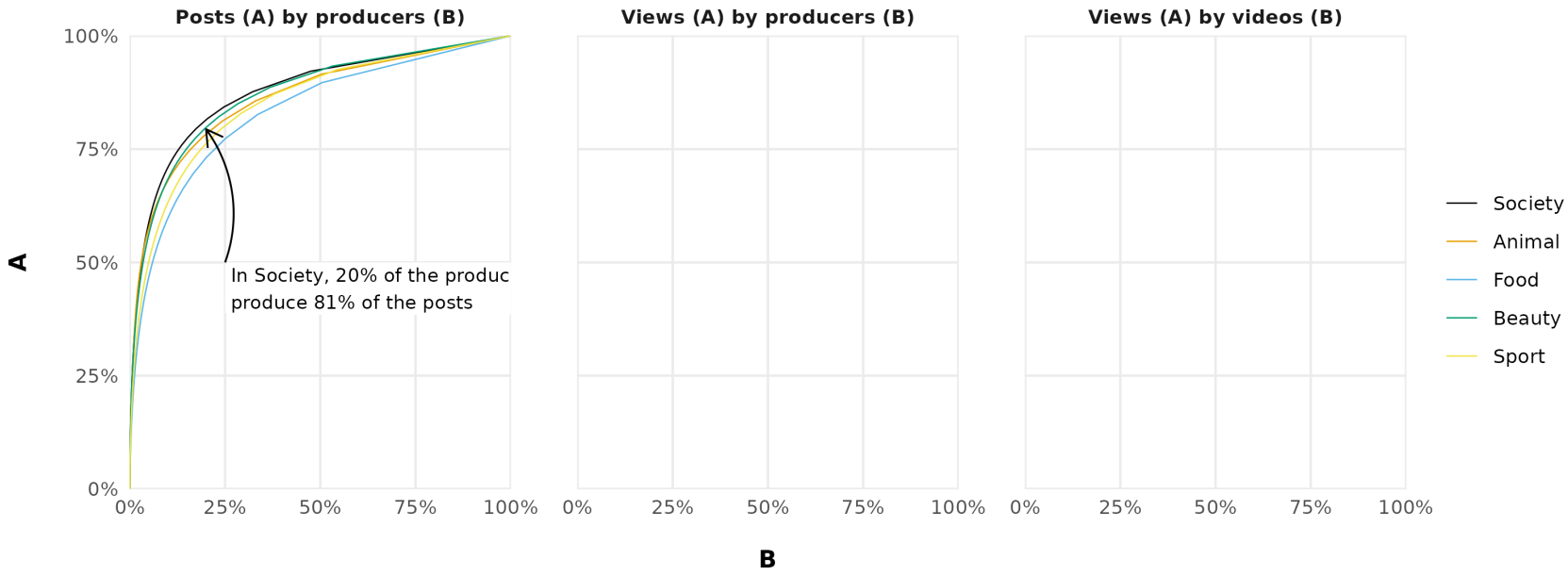
Moderate content get consumed



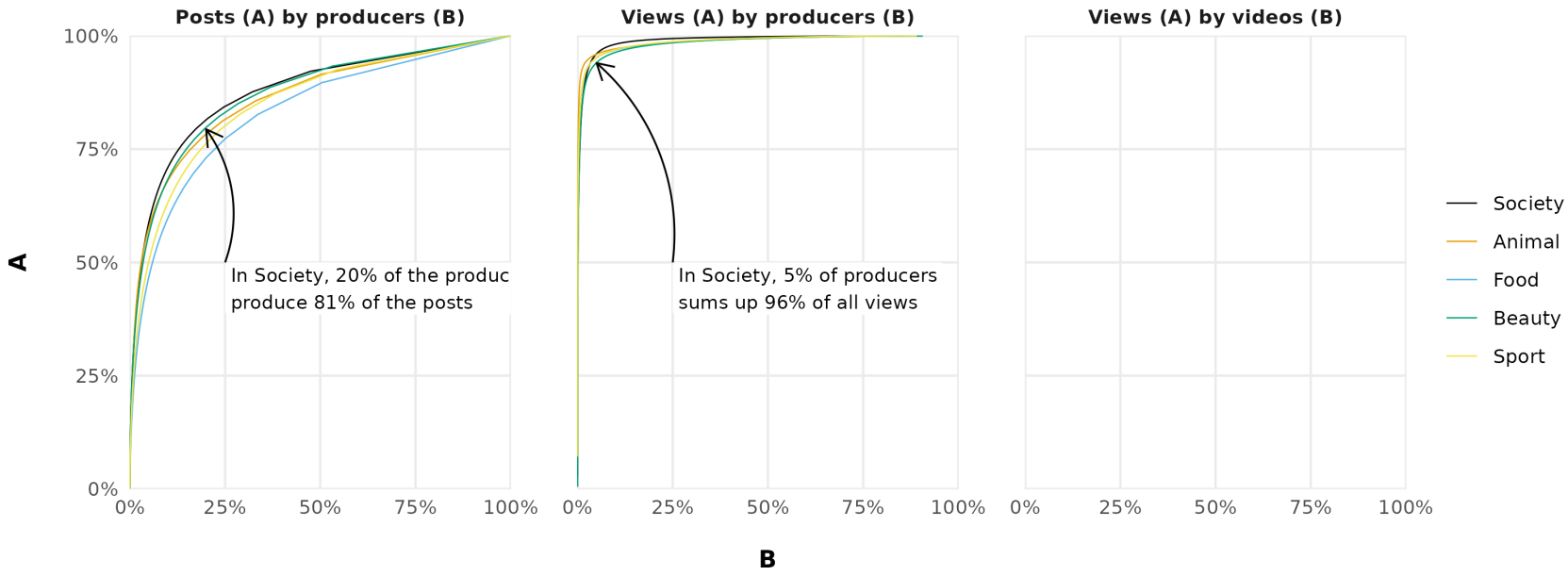
Ideological balance is stable over time



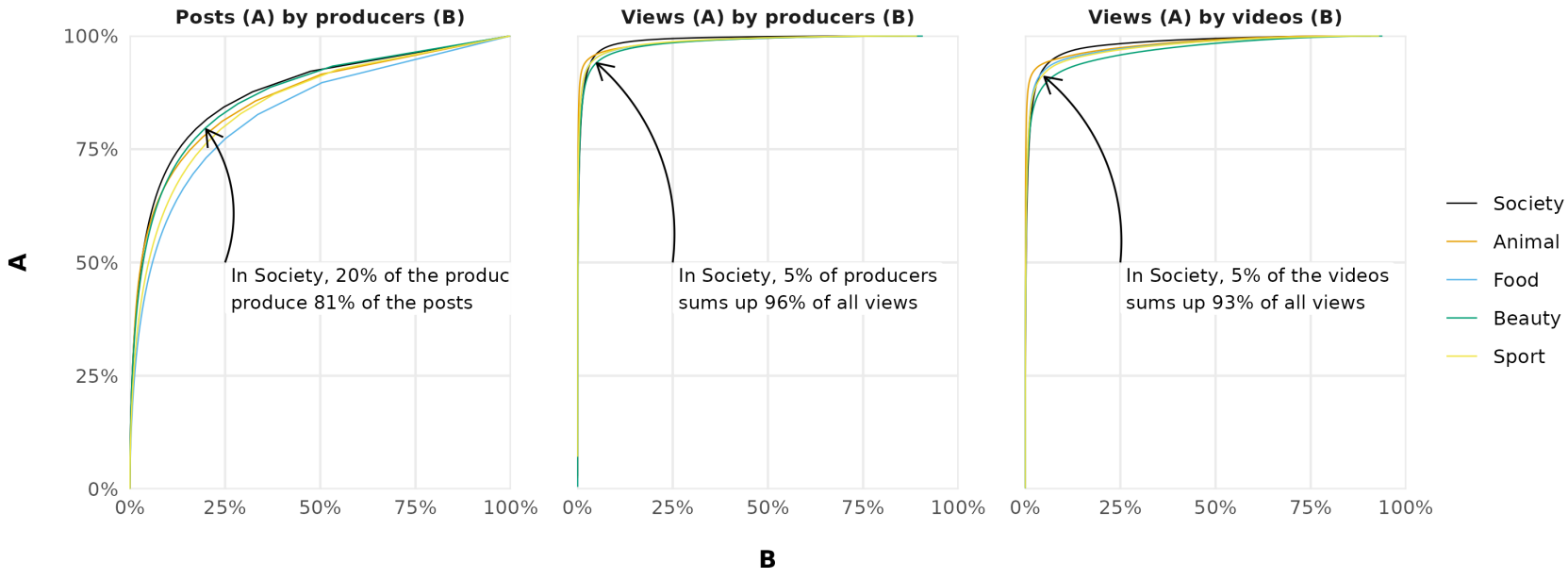
Inequalities



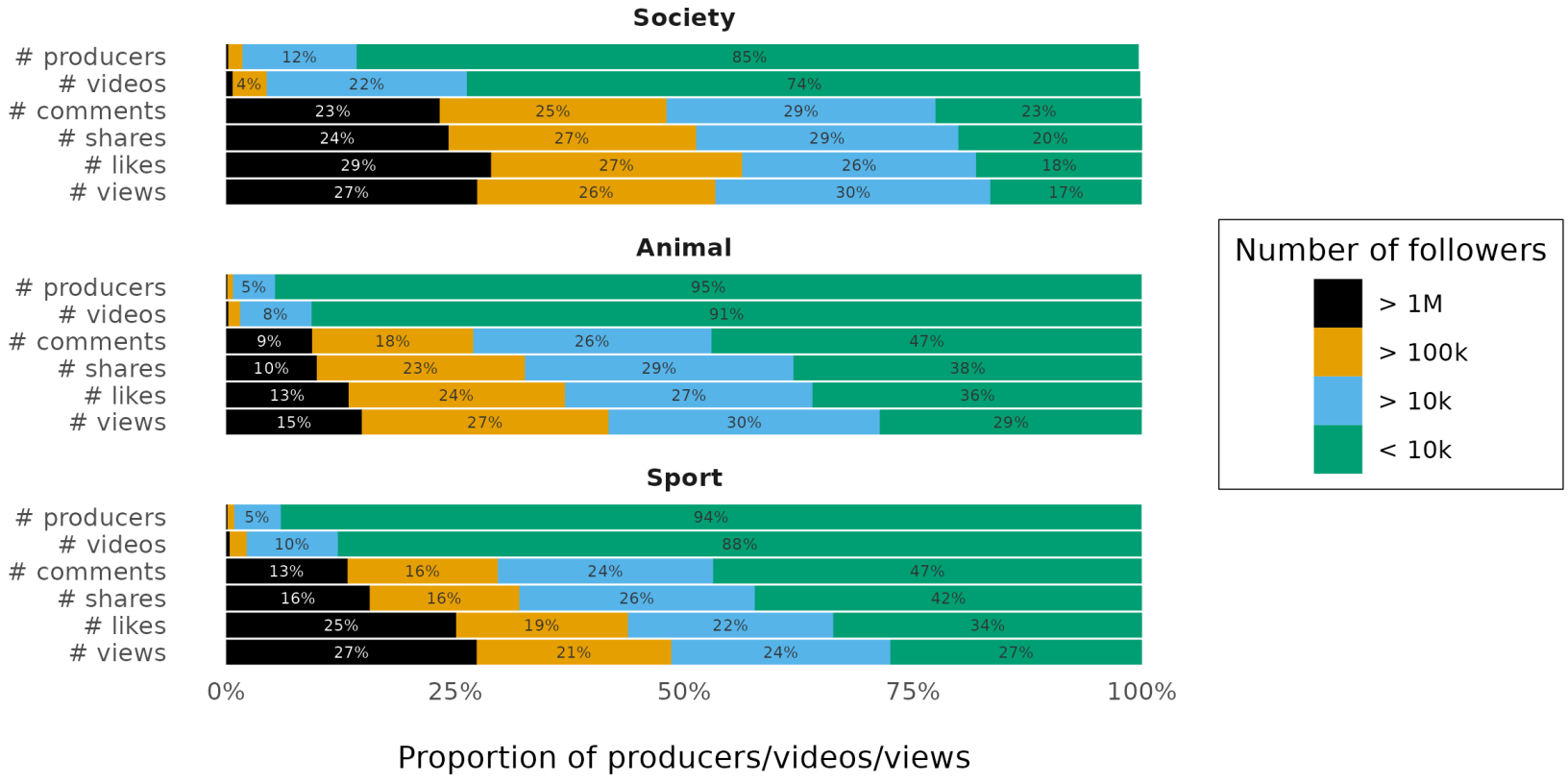
Inequalities



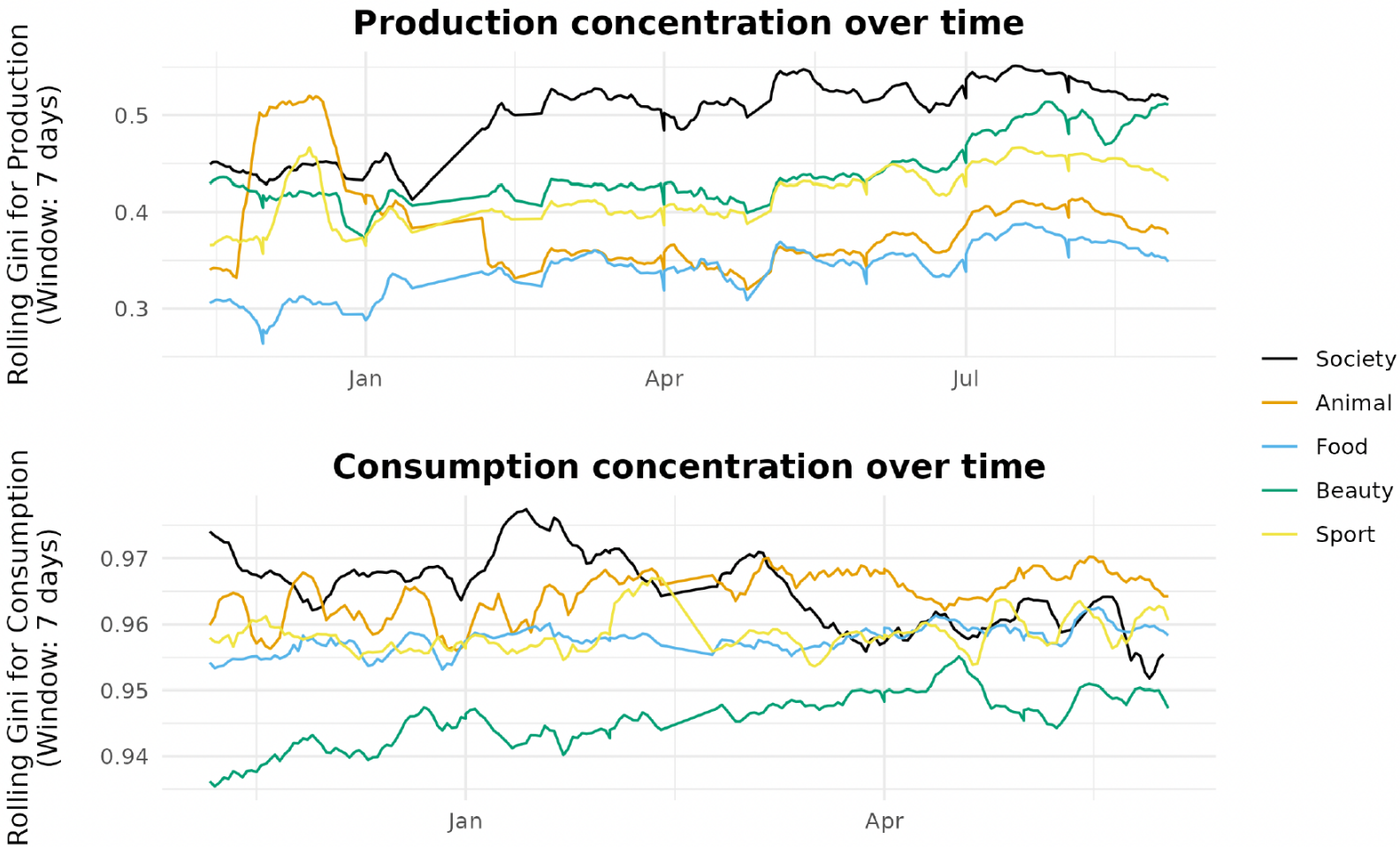
Inequalities



Followers still reflects attention (but don’t drive it)



Higher concentration of political production



Summary

- Massive random sample of US TikTok from Oct. 2024 and Oct. 2025
- 1% of content is political ; 3% of consumption is political
- Both supply and demand very much respond to major events
- No clear algorithmic/demand bias, but moderate content is favored
- Extreme concentration of attention on a small elite of producers

Summary

- Massive random sample of US TikTok from Oct. 2024 and Oct. 2025
- 1% of content is political ; 3% of consumption is political
- Both supply and demand very much respond to major events
- No clear algorithmic/demand bias, but moderate content is favored
- Extreme concentration of attention on a small elite of producers

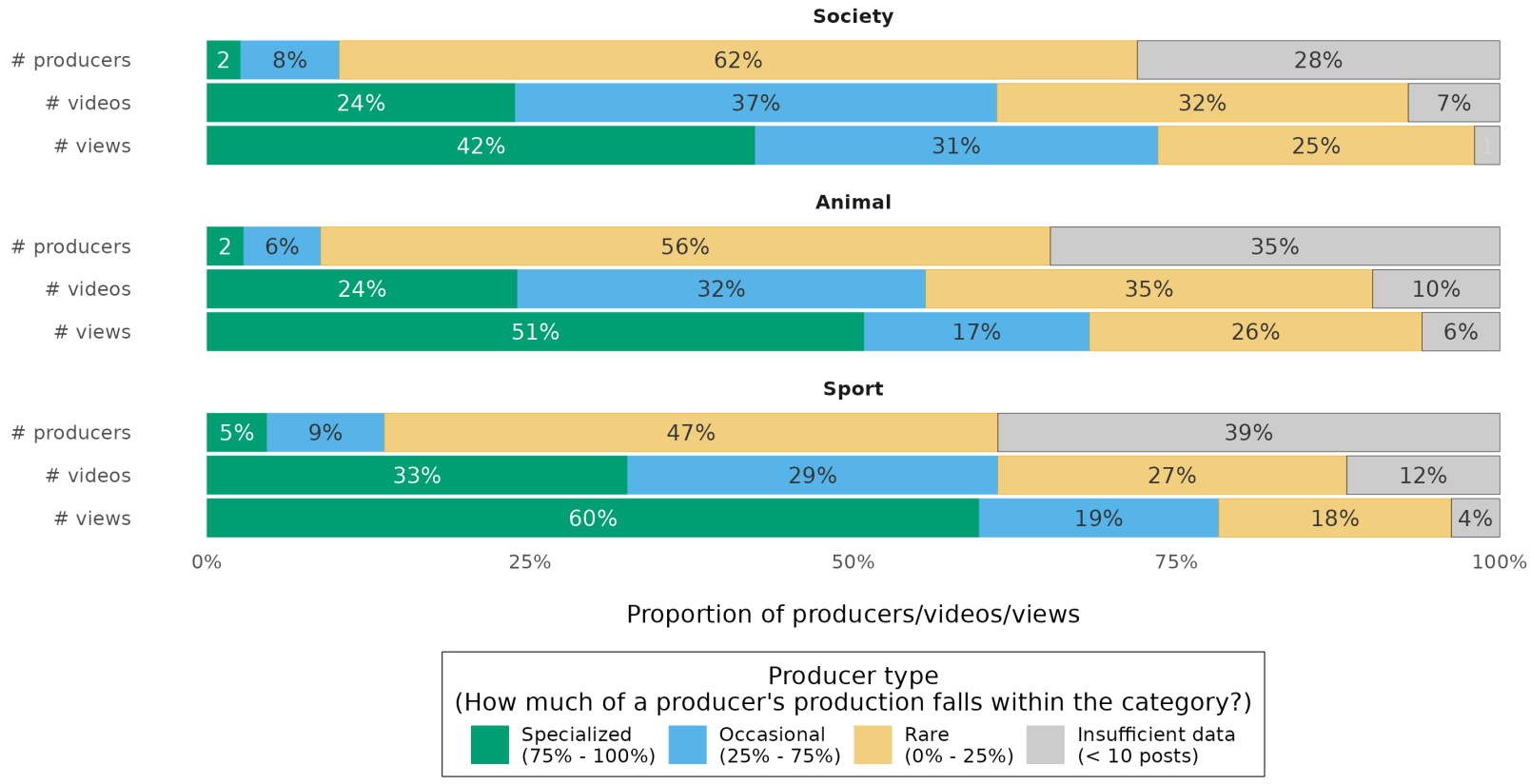
Next steps:

- Identify those elites (especially their credential)
- Concentration dynamics during peak-events

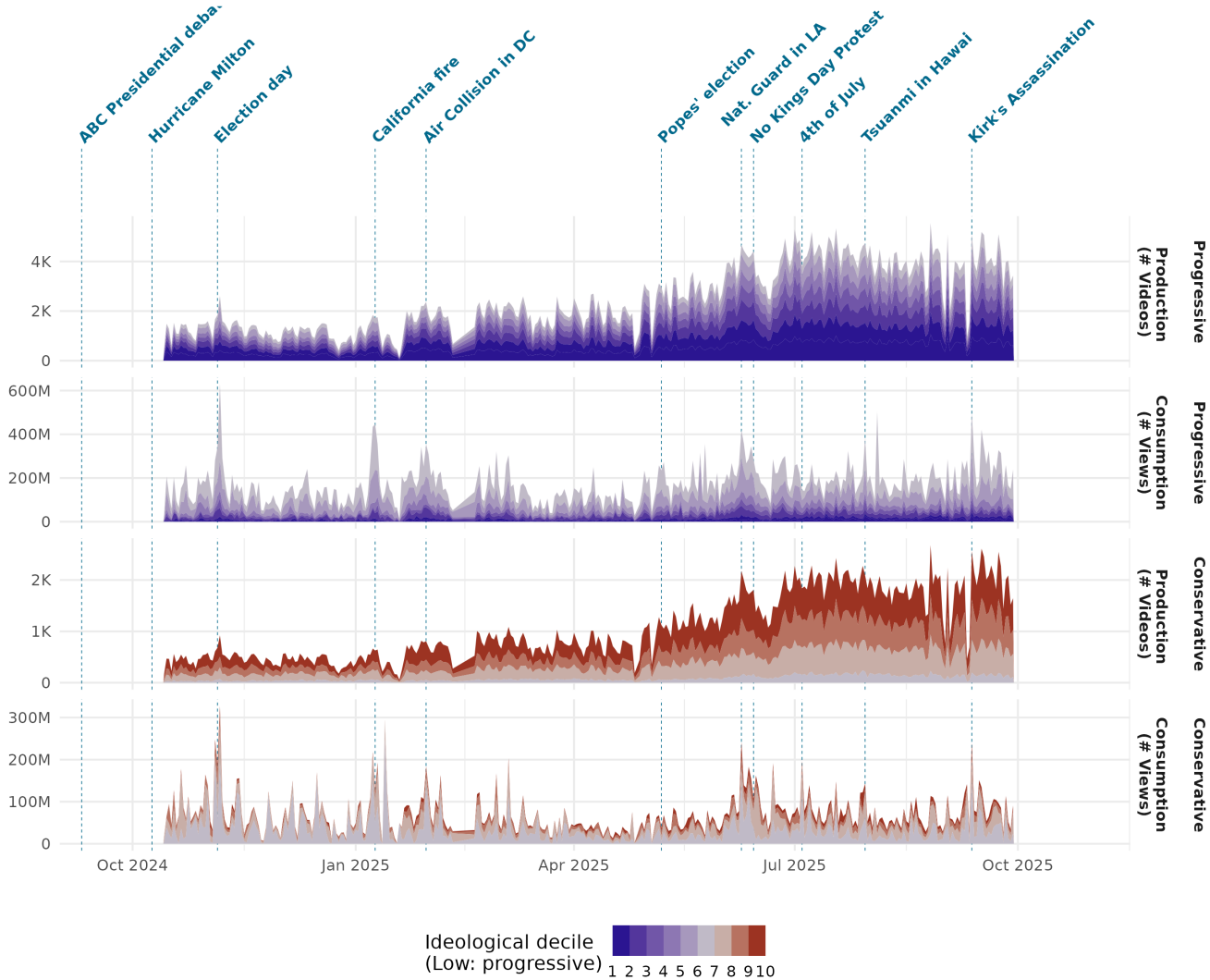
Consequences of short-format/algorithm dialectic

- Democratization: more producers can reach an audience
- Centralization: ‘black-box’ algorithm is vulnerable
- Abundance: more views to distribute
- Short-capture of attention $\rightarrow$ sensationalist content
- Virality $\rightarrow$ shortened aggregate attention cycles

Political content is more likely to be incidental production



Political content is more likely to be incidental production


ABC Presidential deba
Hurricane Milton
Election day
California fire
Air Collision in DC
Popes' election
Nat. Guard in LA
No Kings Day Protest
4th of July
Tsuanmi in Hawai
Kirk's Assassination
4K
2K
0
Progressive
Production (# Videos)
600M
400M
200M
0
Progressive
Consumption (# Views)
2K
1K
0
Conservative
Production (# Videos)
300M
200M
100M
0
Conservative
Consumption (# Views)
Oct 2024
Jan 2025
Apr 2025
Jul 2025
Oct 2025
Ideological decile
(Low: progressive)
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10