
WHEN EXPERTS TALK, DOES ANYONE LISTEN?

THE LIMITS OF EXPERT INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC OPINION

ERIC MERKLEY
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

PRESENTATION FOR THE SPPGA
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PROBLEM



Public opinion is far offside experts on a wide range of issues of science and economics

PROBLEM



Why?

PROBLEM #1: NEWSROOM BIAS





MEDIA BIAS AND COVERAGE OF EXPERTS

- **Episodic framing** → little attention to expert consensus
- **False balance** → citation of contrarian experts
- **Conflict** → citation of polarizing information sources

ISSUE SELECTION



	Liberals Against Experts	Mixed/None	Conservatives Against Experts
Science	GMOs; nuclear safety	Vaccines	Climate change
Economics	Rent control	Trade protectionism; farm support	Immigration; Federal Reserve; road pricing

METHODS



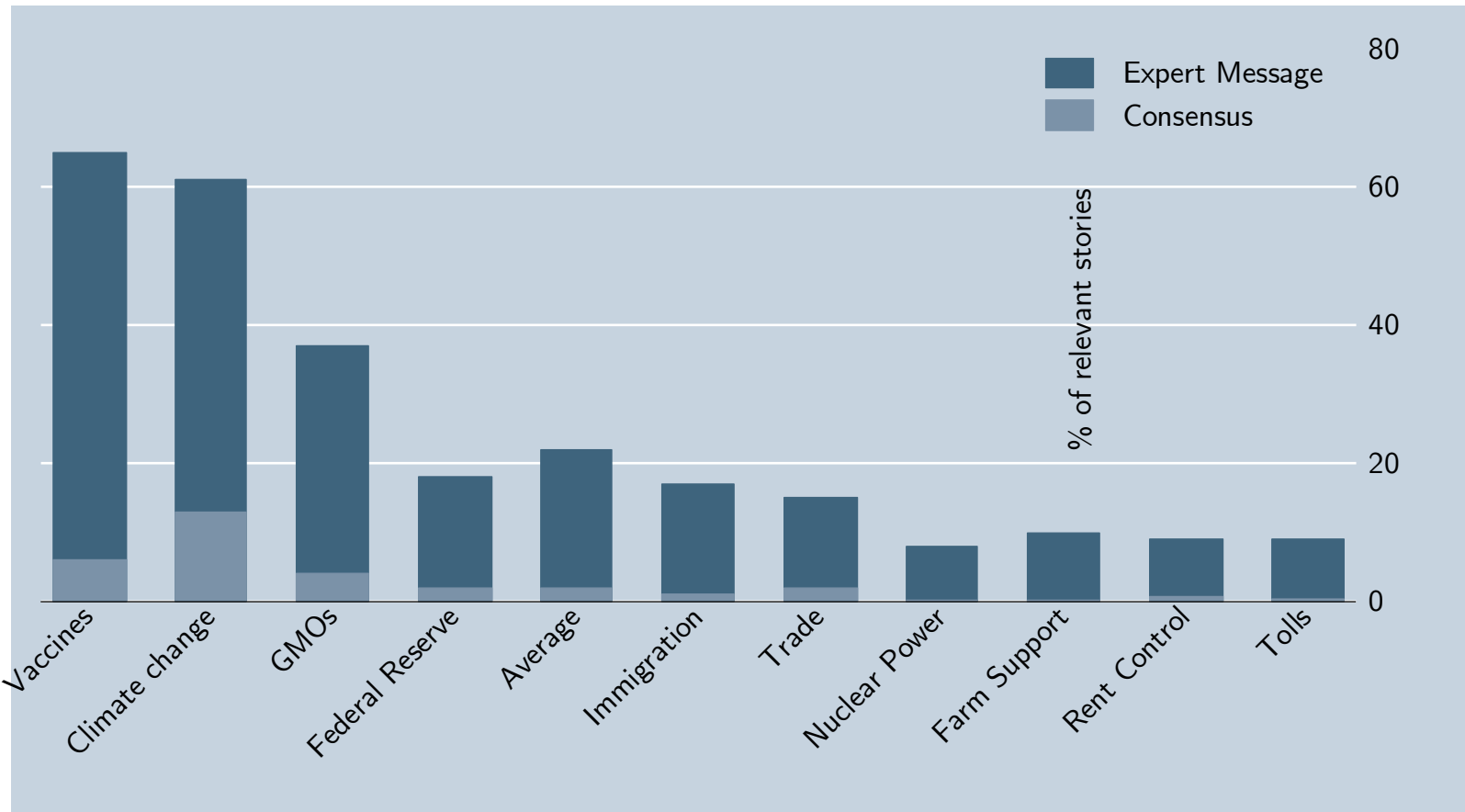
- Manual coding of 3,147 articles
- Coded for:
 - ✓ Expert message related to consensus (Y/N)
 - ✓ Consensus Cue (Y/N)
 - ✓ 'False balance' (Y/N)
 - ✓ Polarizing opponents and allies (Y/N)

FINDINGS

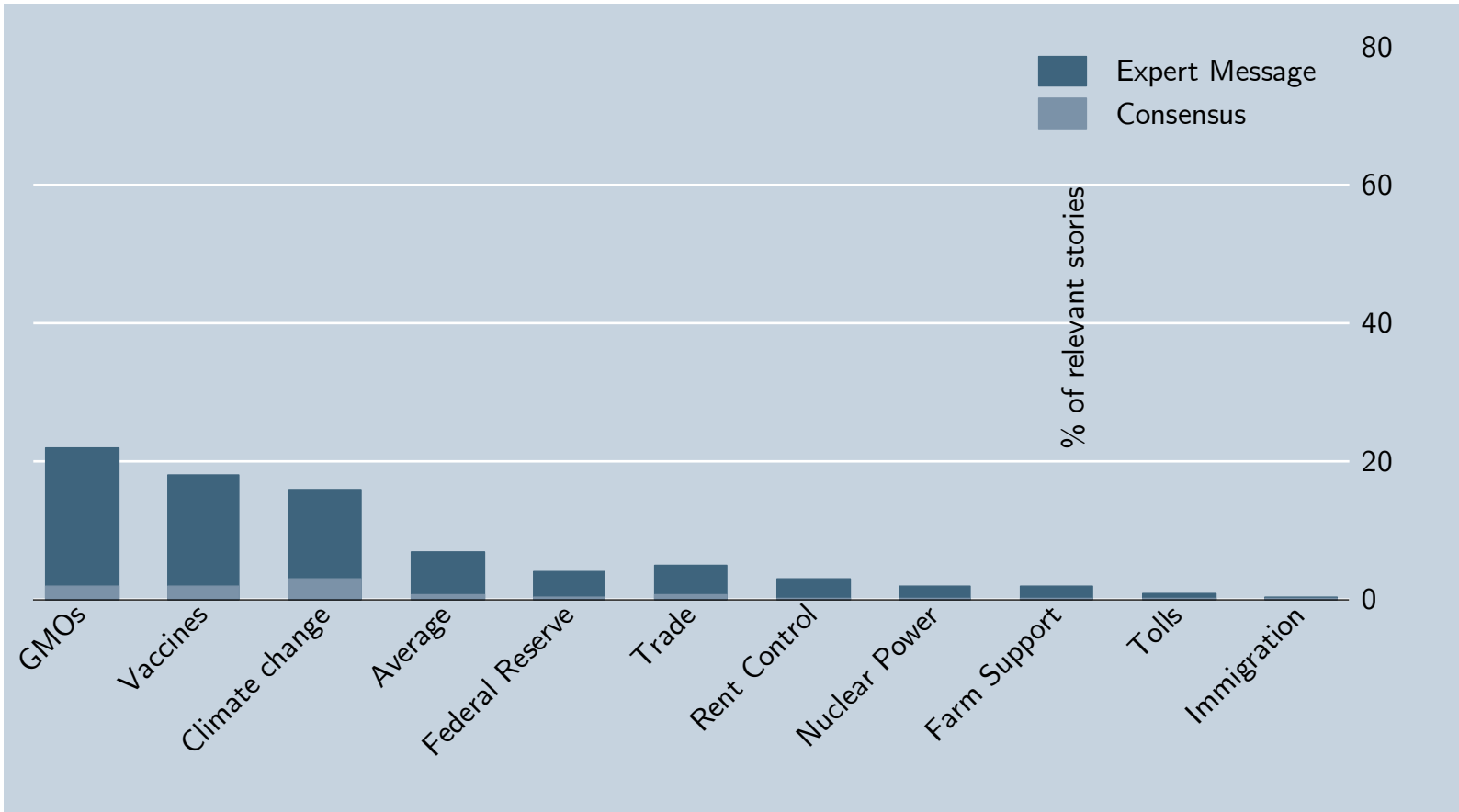


1) Messages of expert consensus are very uncommon

- Only 22% of relevant news stories have a message from an expert related to an area of consensus
- Rare to have a clear signal of consensus (2%)



EXPERT MESSAGES AS % OF RELEVANT COVERAGE



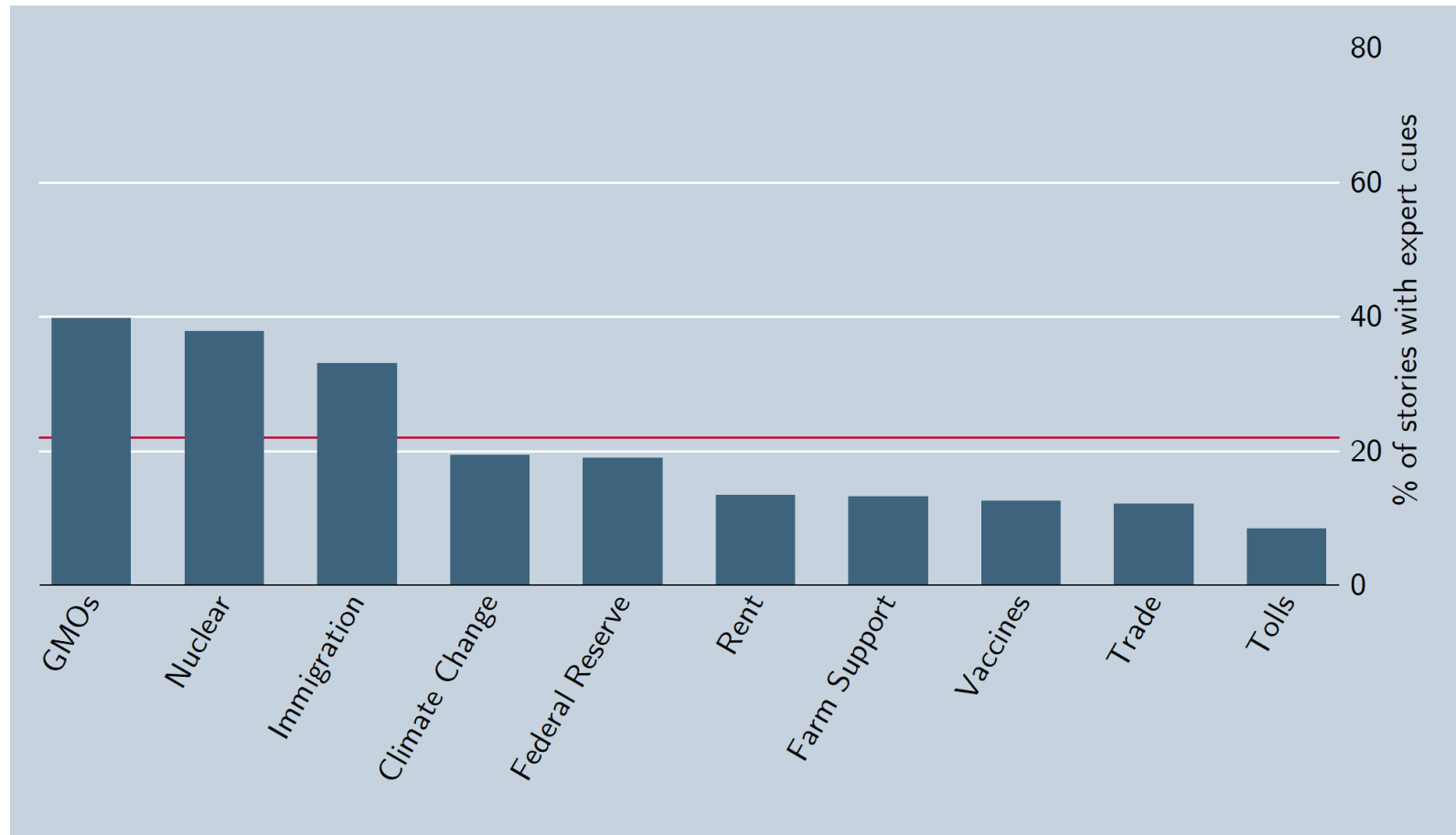
EXPERT MESSAGES AS % OF TOTAL COVERAGE

FINDINGS



2) False balance isn't that common

- Only 22% of stories have 'false balance'



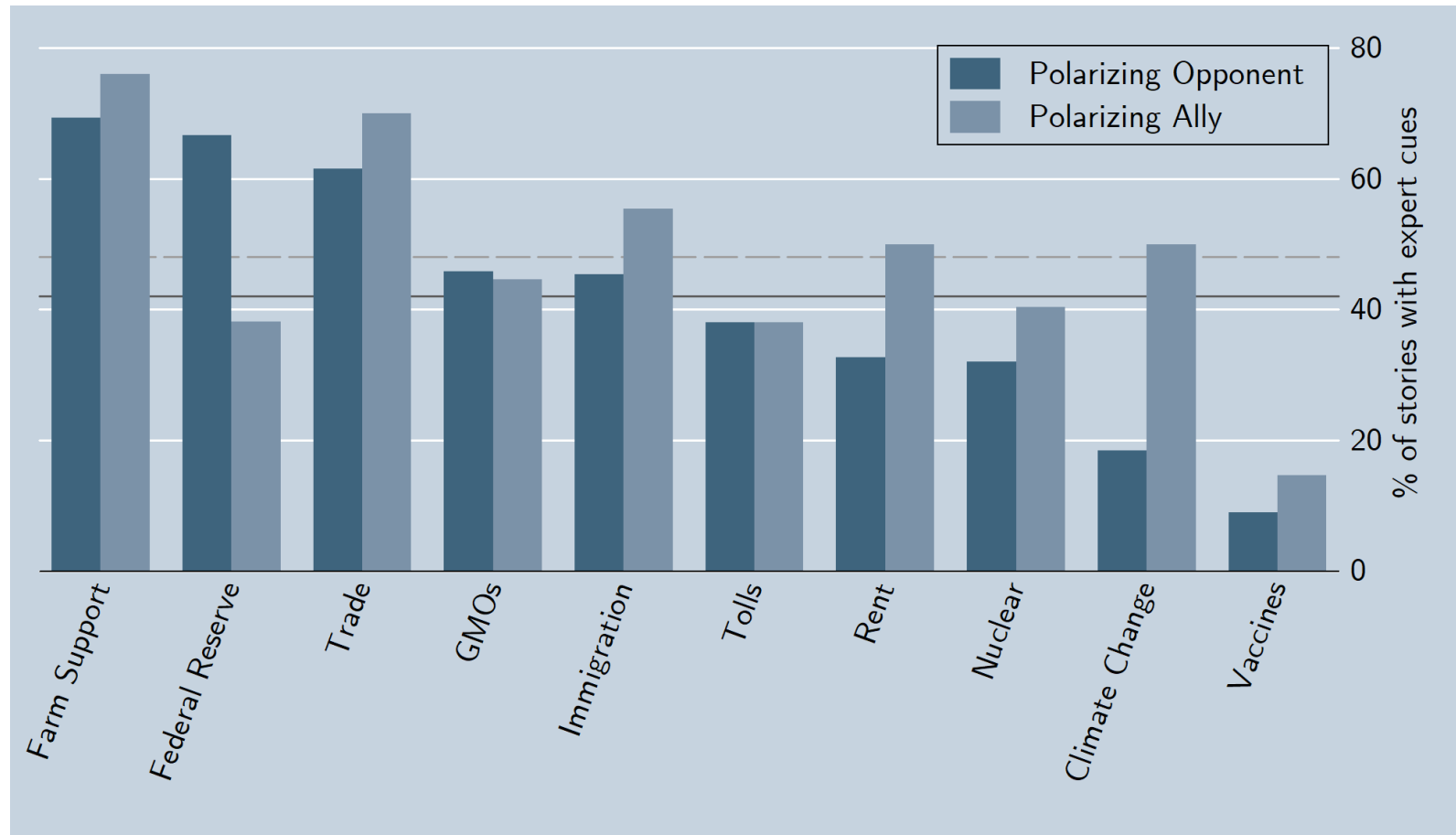
PREVALENCE OF 'FALSE BALANCE' (%)

FINDINGS



3) Balance tends to reflect polarizing political conflict

- 42% of stories with a polarizing political opponent
- 48% of stories have a polarizing ally aligned with the expert community



PREVALENCE OF POLARIZING SOURCES (%)

PROBLEM #2: POLITICAL PARTY ELITES

WITH DOMINIK STECULA



OUR ARGUMENT



Partisans learned their positions on climate science from political elites

- Communicated through the mass media
- In-group vs. out-group cueing

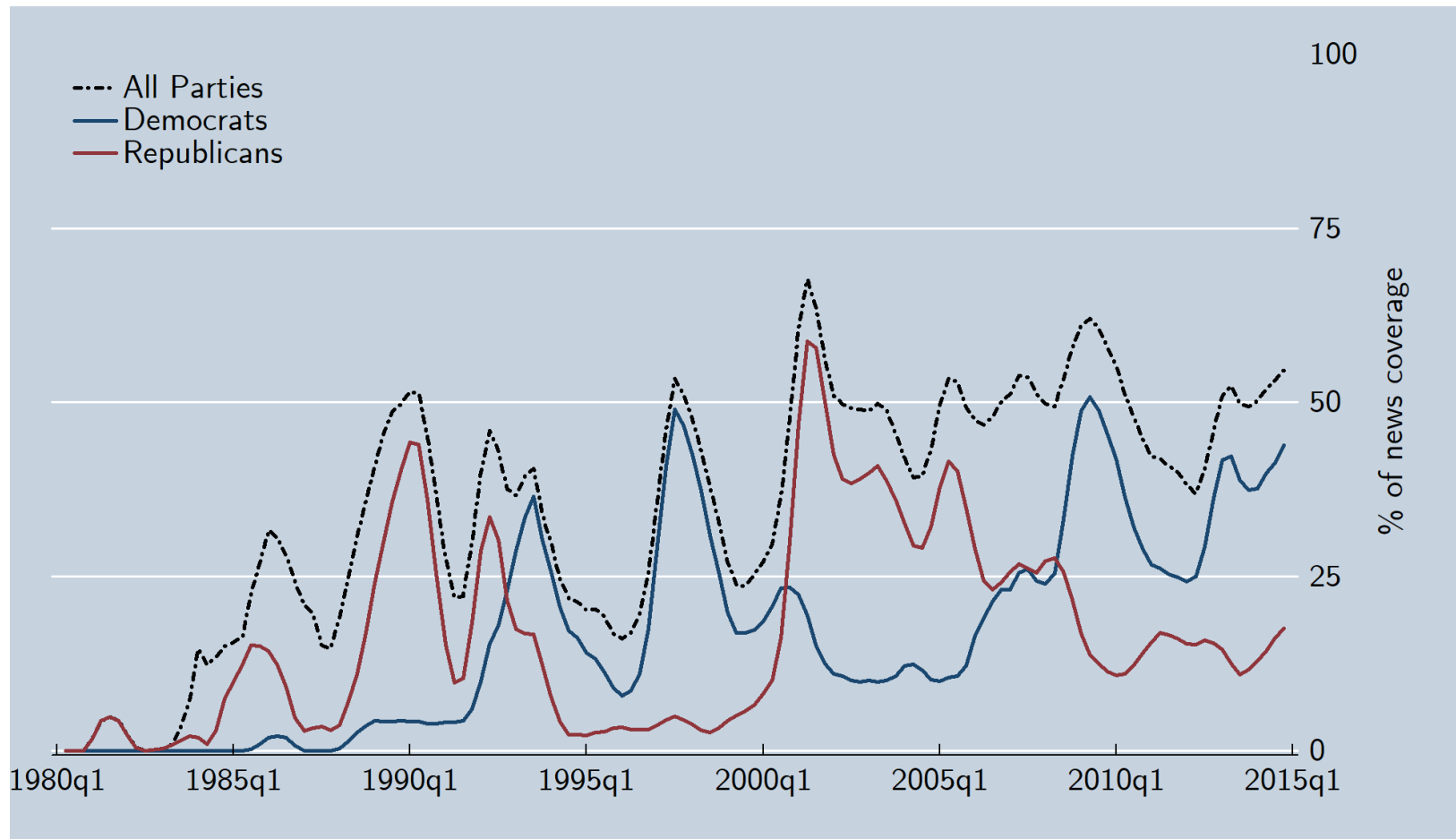
RESEARCH QUESTION



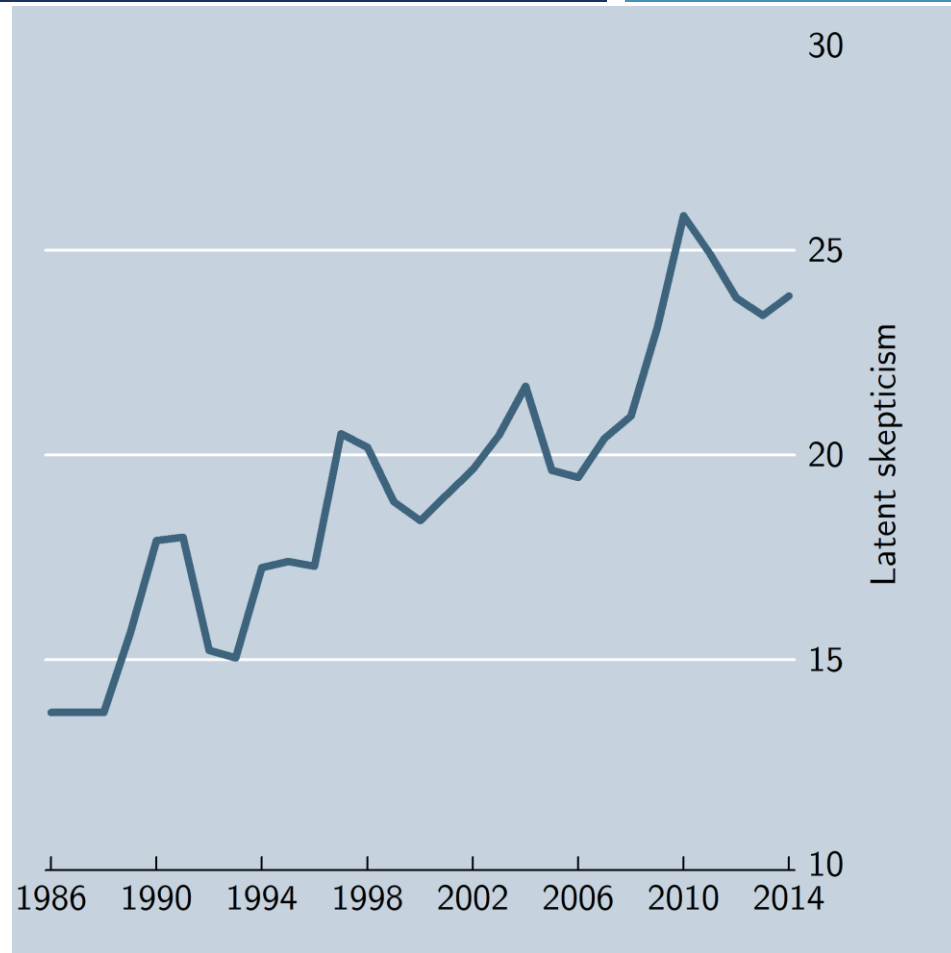
Are party elite messages in the news media correlated with aggregate levels of climate skepticism after controlling for other factors?

17 major news sources, 25,000 news stories

- National and regional newspapers
- Broadcast news (ABC, CBS, NBC)
- Cable (CNN, Fox, MSNBC)
- Associated Press



PARTY CUES IN NEWS CONTENT OVER TIME (%)

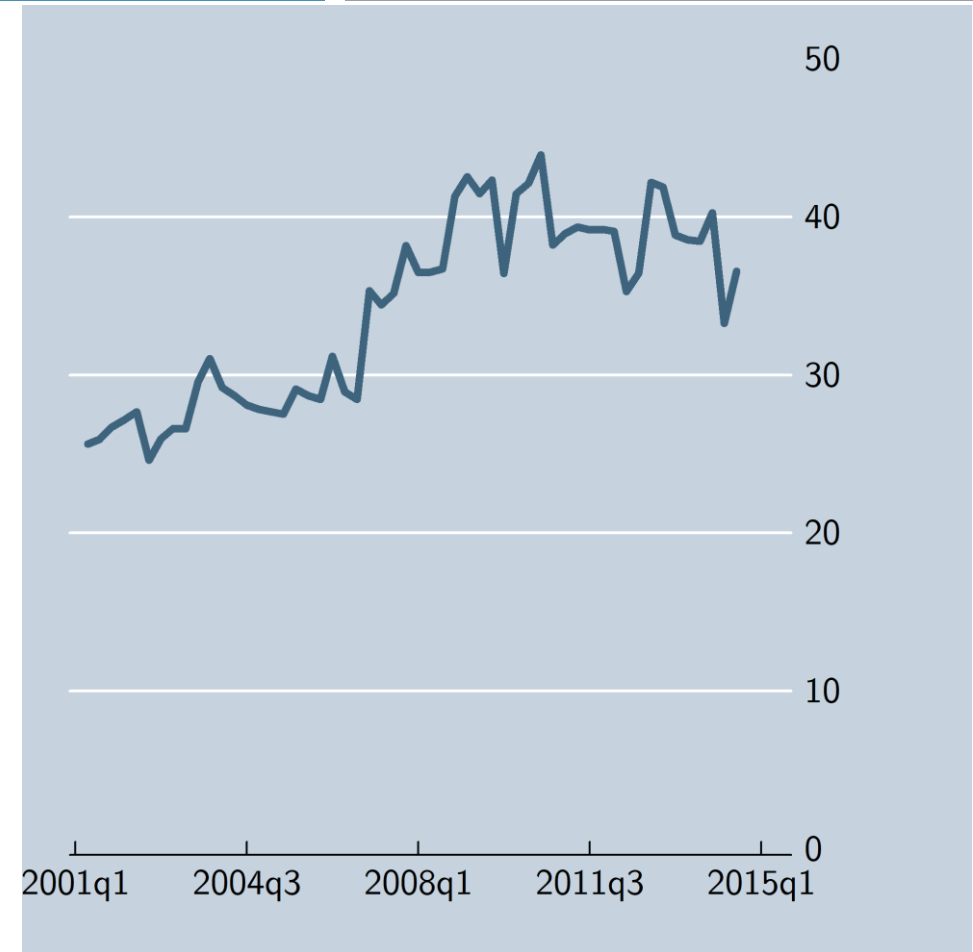


ANNUAL (LEFT) AND QUARTERLY (RIGHT) CLIMATE SKEPTICISM

AGGREGATE POLARIZATION



- Partisan Climate Change Threat Index (PCCTI) from Carmichael and Brulle (2017)
- Quarterly from 2001-2014

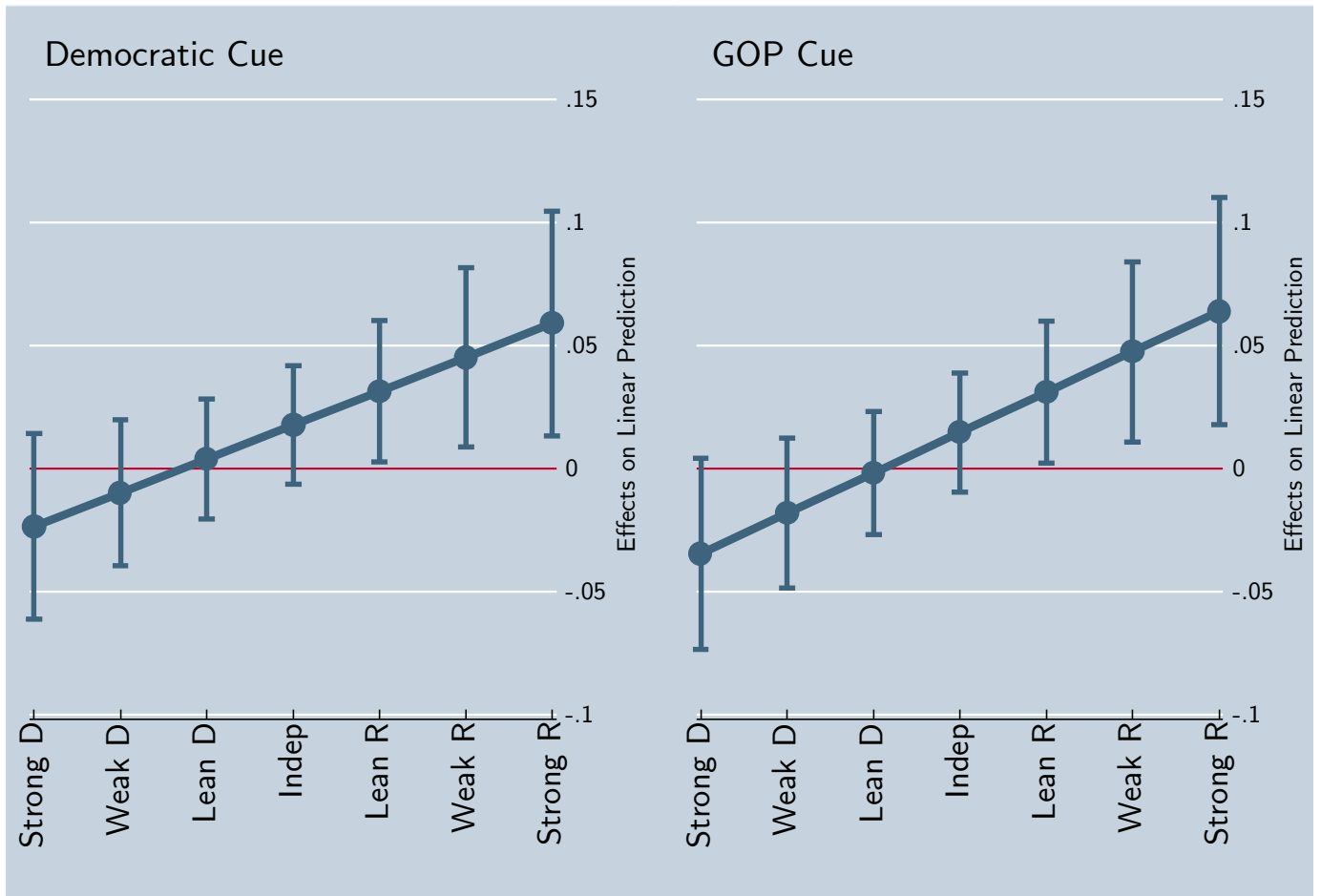


PERCEPTIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE THREAT BY PARTY (LEFT), POLARIZATION (RIGHT)

FINDINGS



- Most consistent predictor → messages from Democratic elites
- Evidence of out-group and (to a lesser extent) in-group cueing for Republican party supporters



EFFECT OF PARTY CUE ON CLIMATE SKEPTICISM

PROBLEM #3: ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM



ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM



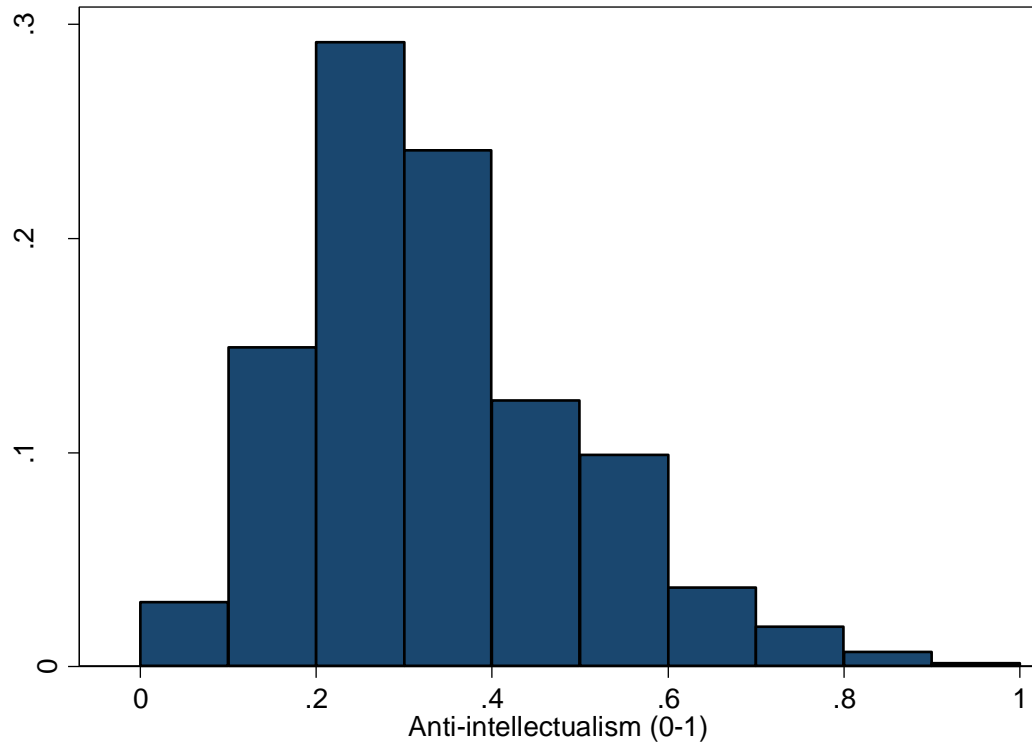
Anti-intellectualism: a generalized mistrust of experts and intellectuals rooted in a suspicion of scholarly and intellectual pursuits.

HYPOTHESIS



Anti-intellectualism limits the persuasiveness of expert consensus cues

DATA AND MEASUREMENT



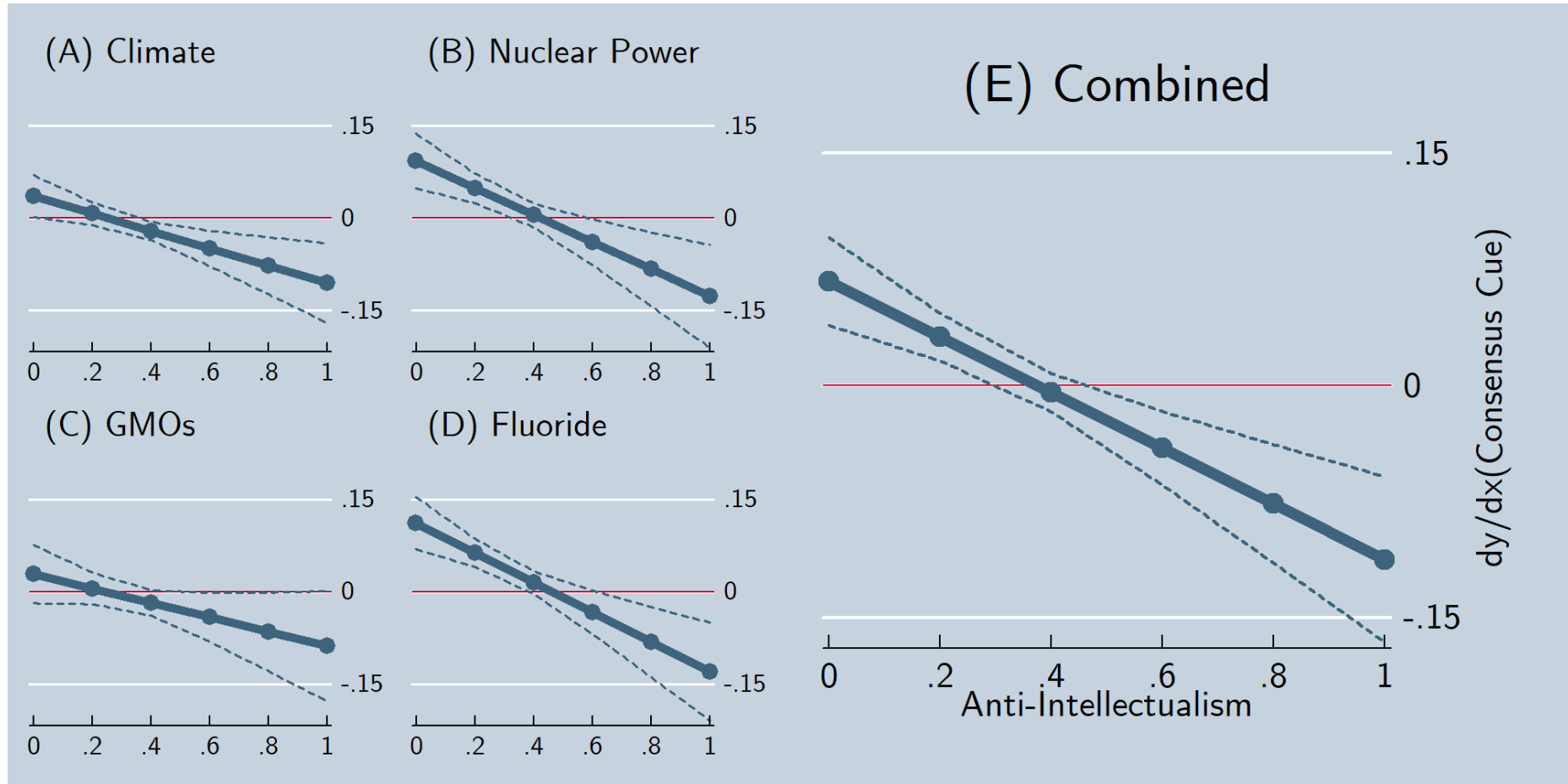
- Survey of 3,600 American citizens gathered from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk)
- Battery of trust questions for various types of experts (e.g. scientists, economists, doctors, etc.)

MEASUREMENT



Measured level of agreement with four statements related to the following issues:

- Climate change (80% support)
- Nuclear power (48% support)
- GMOs (46% support)
- Fluoride (53% support)



PERSUASIVE EFFECT OF CONSENSUS CUE ACROSS ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

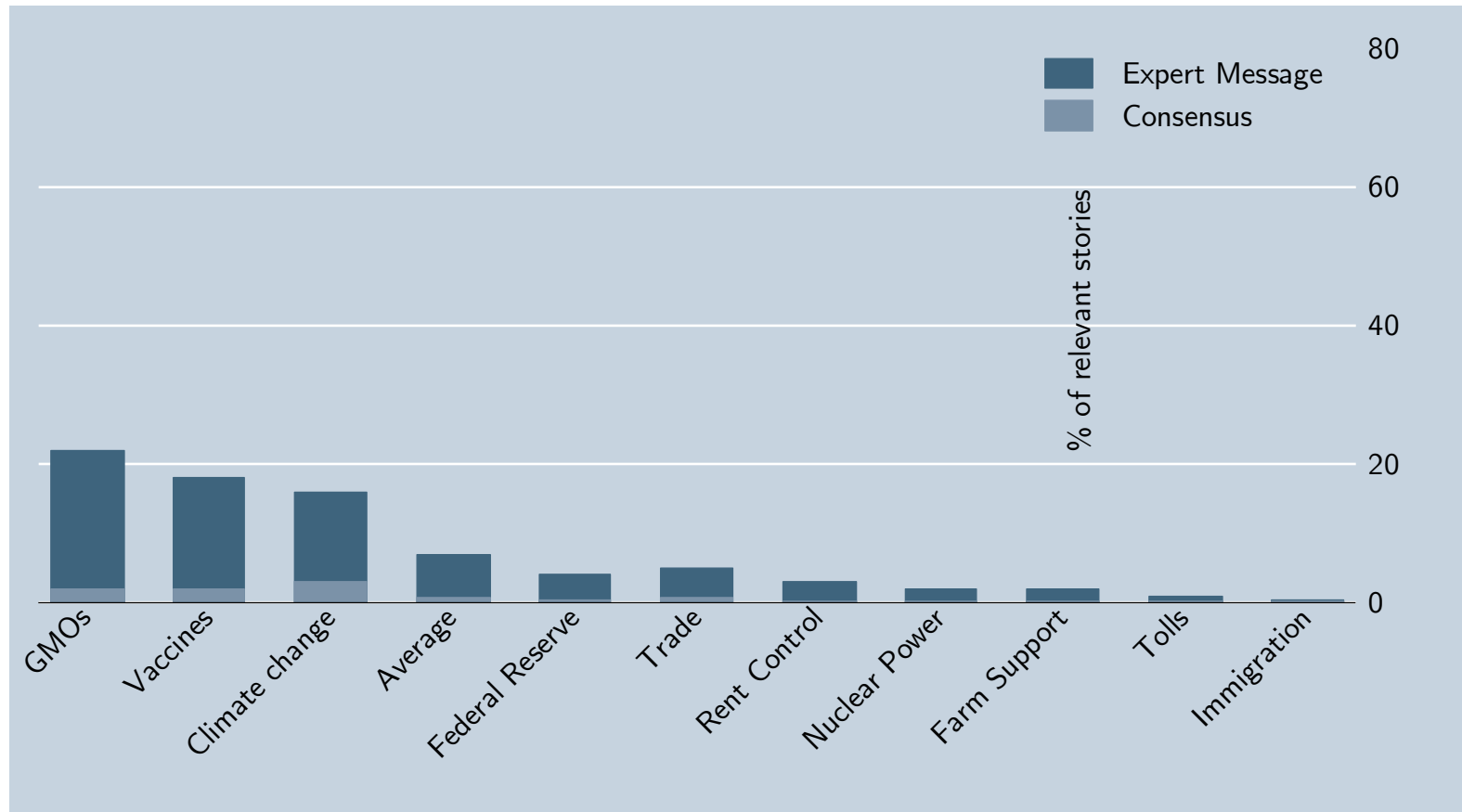
IMPLICATIONS



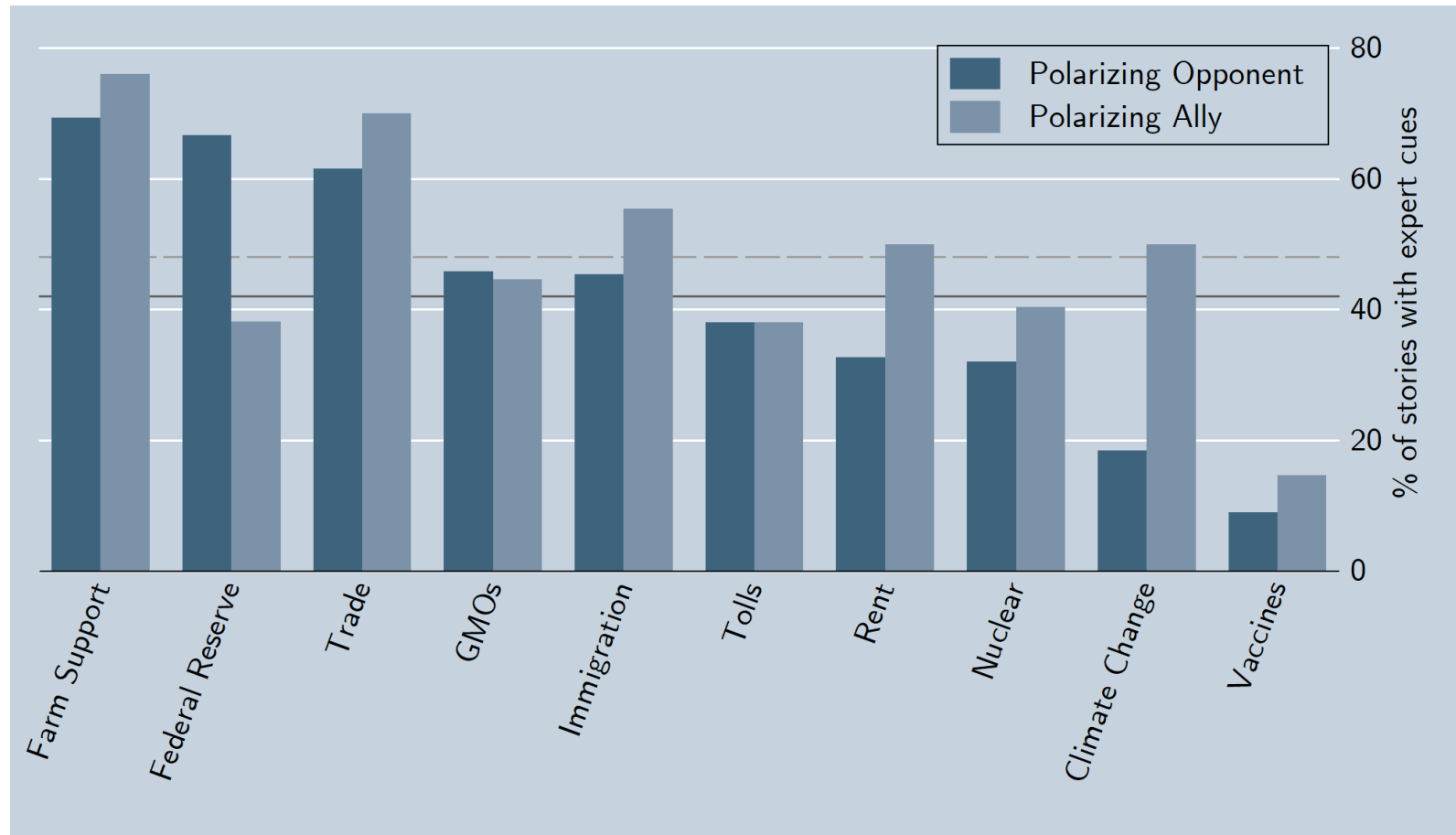
IMPLICATIONS



- **Need to take the information environment seriously**
- Limits of ideology-driven motivated skepticism – not the only motivation and too static to explain over time changes
- Limits on effectiveness of consensus as a persuasion tactic?



EXPERT MESSAGES AS % OF TOTAL COVERAGE

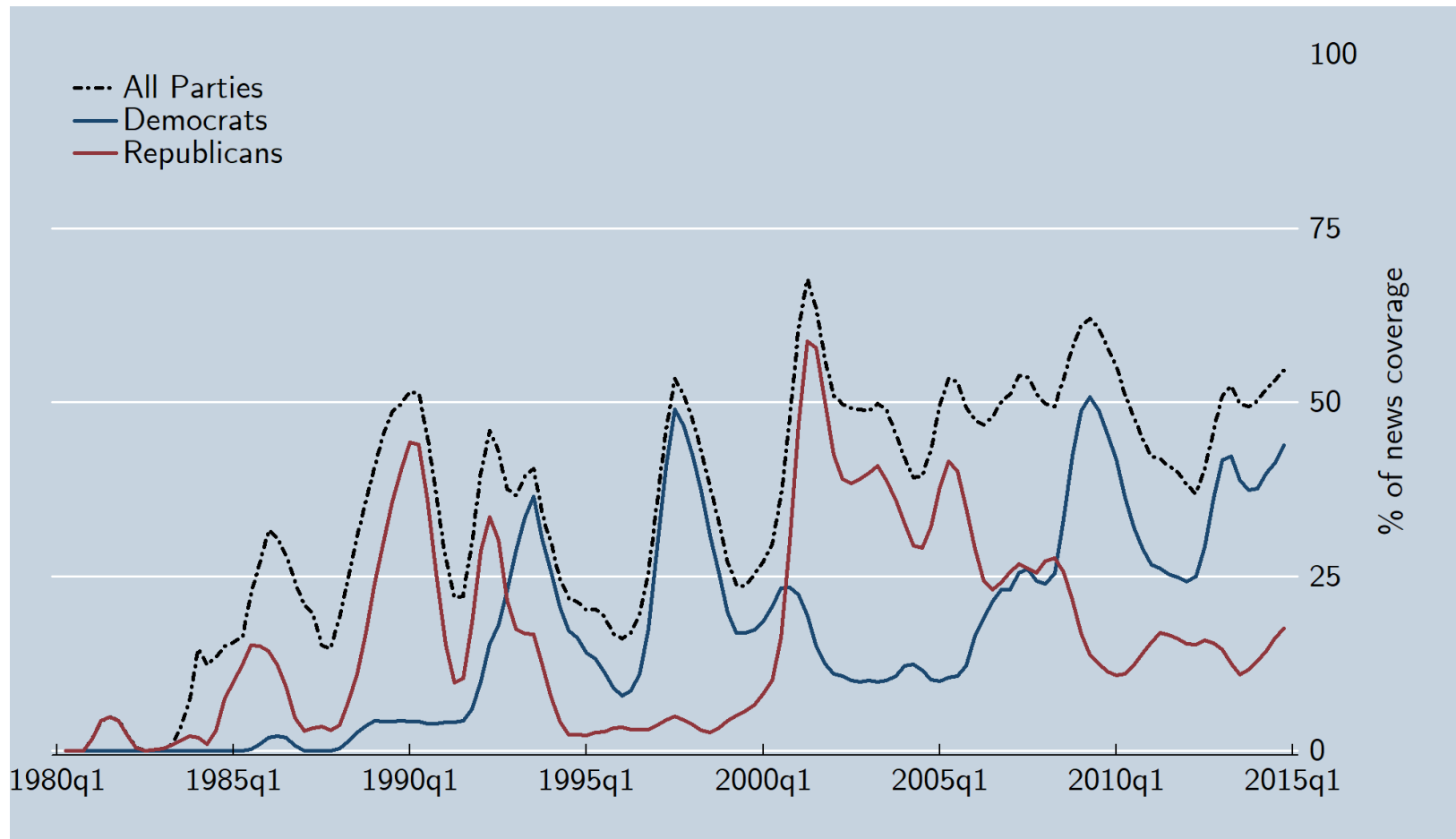


PREVALENCE OF POLARIZING SOURCES (%)

IMPLICATIONS



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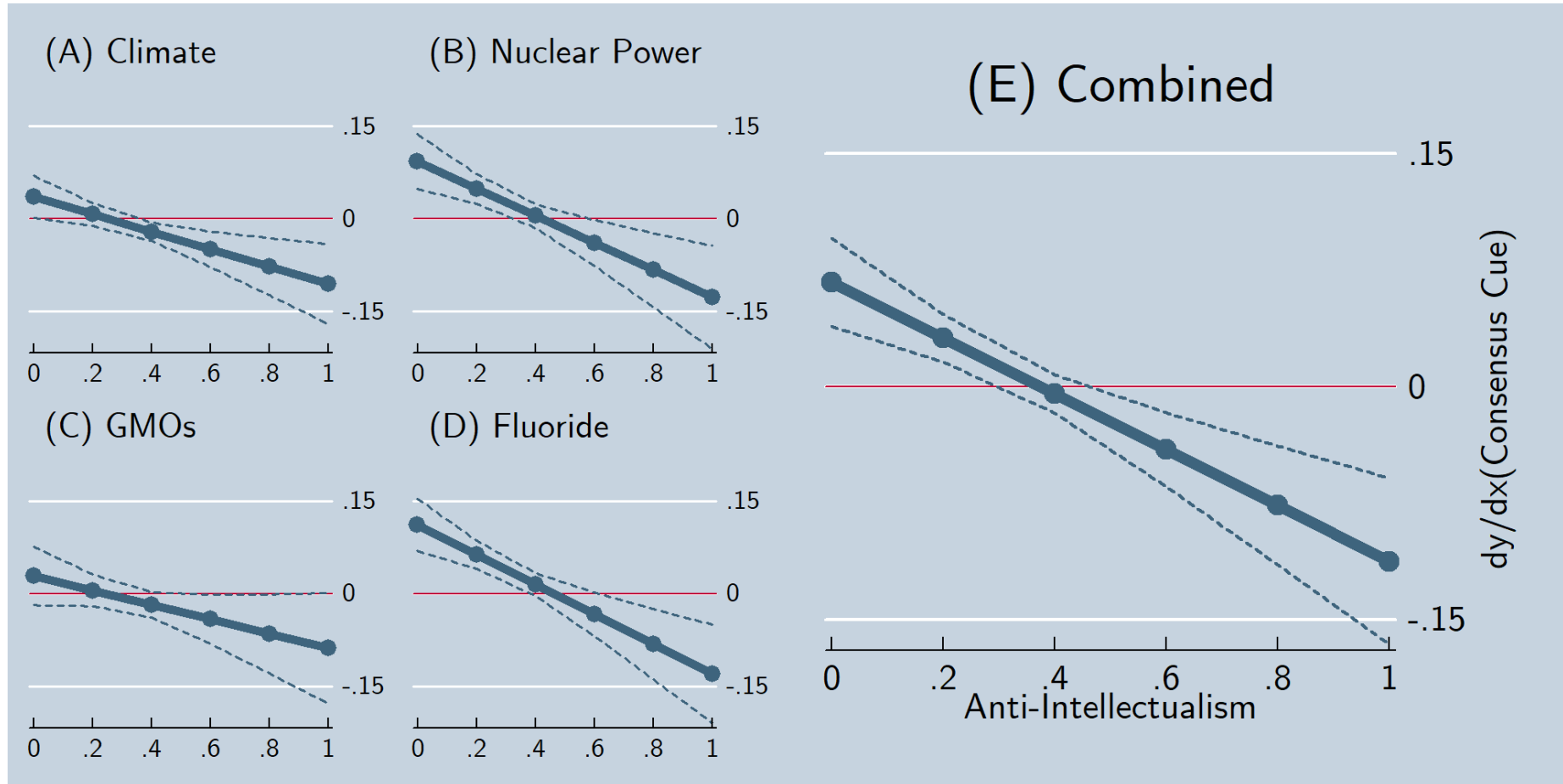


PARTY CUES IN NEWS CONTENT OVER TIME (%)

IMPLICATIONS



- Need to take the information environment seriously
- Limits of ideology-driven motivated skepticism – not the only motivation and too static to explain over time changes
- **Limits on effectiveness of consensus as a persuasion tactic?**



PERSUASIVE EFFECT OF CONSENSUS CUE ACROSS ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM



Thank You!

Contact: eric.merkley@ubc.ca
www.ericmerkley.com